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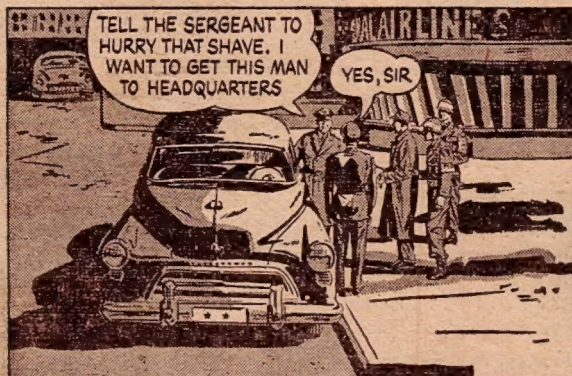
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VOLUME 46

AUGUST, 1952

NUMBER 2

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TRAIL OF DEATH

By **ALLAN K. ECHOLS**

It wasn't the Texas longhorns that bothered the farmers along the cattle trails, or even the boisterous cowhands. It was a little thing—too small to notice—but one that only shotguns could stop!

IN CONNECTION with the old trail drives, usually one thinks of the hazards overcome by the tough hombres who drove the longhorns on their northward migration. The most dramatic of these are considered to be the Indian raids in Oklahoma, the thieves and crooked politicians who had to be fought or bought off, droughts, stampedes and swollen rivers.

But there was one hazard which if less dramatic was more effective in discouraging the drives than all these, and it became so effective that it eventually stopped the drives altogether. It was the farmer's shotgun.

The longhorn did not travel alone. Every cow, steer or bull that went up the trail took along with him a colony of fever ticks. These busy colonies of free-loaders would fill up on the blood of the cow, infect him with fever, then drop off along the trail to breed and multiply. Then his progeny would climb up the nearest grass stem and await the coming of the next animal which could give him a feast of blood, which he ungratefully paid for by infecting the animal that fed him.

When Texas stock went north, it took its ticks along with it, dropping them off by the millions along the grassy trail, to multiply and wait for some local bossy belonging to a Missouri, Iowa or Illinois farmer, to come along and furnish a free meal.

The result was that when a trail herd went over a neighborhood, it scattered mil-

lions of these fever ticks along the way, and the passage of a herd thus left a trail of death from Texas fever among the farmers' herds.

The ticks didn't belong to the farmers' cattle; since they would not survive the winters in the north, they were not a permanent menace. But since trail driving was a summer activity, the traveling herds brought renewed outbreaks of fever along with them every summer.

Because Texas ranchers were hungry for northern beef money, they would drive wherever it suited them, bringing death to local cattle all along the trail.

The farmers fought back with quarantine laws, but a law is no better than the men who enforce it. Cattlemen had big money. Hence the laws were about as effective as modern prohibition and anti-gambling laws. There was too much money finding its way to the right places, and the laws weren't enforced.

Then the farmers decided to enforce their own laws. They did it with shotguns and buckshot. They stampeded herds, killed cattle and riders, and generally made it so unprofitable for the trail herder that he finally found himself licked, and turned to the railroads.

Thus a few loads of buckshot, the farmers' usual present-day treatment for watermelon-stealing boys, effectively cured the trail driver of the idea that he could go wherever he chose. Shotguns finally closed the cattle trails.

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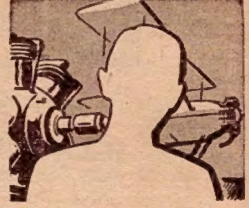
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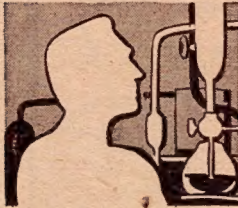
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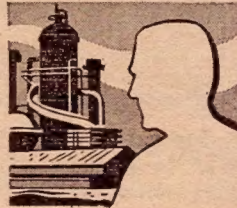
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By JOHN T. LYNCH

A TOWN meeting was called for the night of July 10th, 1861, in Virginia City's little town hall. The crowd that gathered was so large that the affair was moved over to Maguire's Opera House. The town had never witnessed such a general turnout of miners, gamblers, merchants, gentlemen and bums. Interest ran high. President Lincoln had honored the Territory of Nevada with its first governor, and this gathering was to make town plans to welcome the great man, James W. Nye, of New York.

Salty Reese, chosen for the job because he was noted for plain talk, addressed his fellow citizens.

"We'll make this here meetin' short an' sweet," announced Salty. "You all know that Governor Nye will arrive here in Virginia City on July the fifteenth, an' we got to give him a fittin' welcome. They's goin' to be a big parade an' a banquet, an' anybody what wants to can be in on both. That's already settled. This great Territory is—"

"Cut out th' long-winded stuff an' come to the point!" yelled someone in back of the house.

"Yeah! Stop the speechifyin' an' tell us what we came here for!"

Salty Reese held up a big hand for silence. Erasing the smile from his face he said, "All right. This is it: This meetin' was called to tell everybody that we got to behave good while we entertain the Gov'ner. For some reason or other, you all know that this town has got kind of a bad name. Its on account of all the gunplay and daily killin's that go on. They's three times as many people in our boothill than they is livin' hooman bein's. This might give the new Gov'ner an idee we are a bunch of rowdies. We don't want him to be under false impressions. So our policy committee has decided that they will be no gunfights, stabbin's, nor other mayhems, committed at any time durin' the welcomin' celebration on July fifteenth. No loud quarrels, no riots, no nothin'!"

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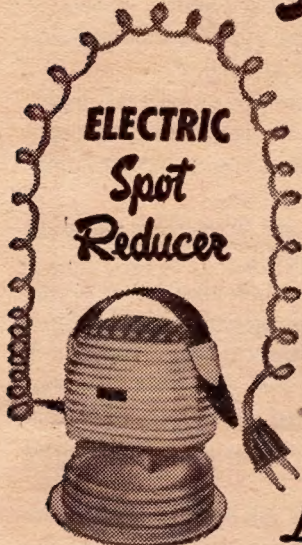
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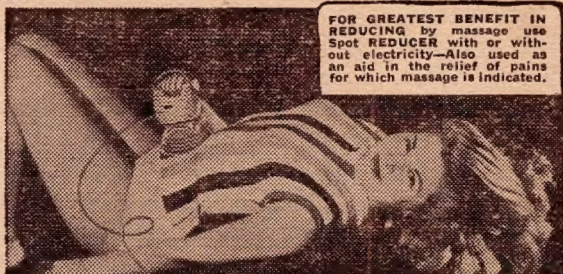


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(Continued from page 8)

As one man, the crowd agreed to the dictum. Cheering and singing, the meeting adjourned. They'd show the new Governor they were a fine, peaceful lot of upstanding and law-loving citizens.

At one o'clock on the afternoon of July 15th, Virginia City turned out to greet Governor Nye. It was a bang-up affair, in every sense of the term. Nothing had been said about shooting guns into the air. Led by the boys of the Fire Companies—Engine Company Number 1, The Knickerbocker, Washoe, and Hook and Ladder Number 1—the parade of welcome wended its noisy, happy way up C Street. The local brass band played its original version of "Hail to the Chief." Governor Nye, in an ornate open carriage, stood and bowed right and left. Hat in hand, and smiling affably, he greeted the citizens lining the route.

Governor Nye was pleasantly surprised at the welcome he was getting. Why, these folks were not a bit like what he had expected. He had heard so much about the man-for-breakfast reputation of Virginia City that he had expected something else entirely. He didn't know just what. But certainly these good folks had been much maligned by the Eastern newspapers and general gossip. They were not rowdies at all—and they sure knew how to welcome a man!

Although Salty Reese and the other members of the official welcoming committee would not admit it, they were greatly amazed when the parade had come to an end and the great banquet had started, without a single bit of gunplay in the usual, deadly manner for which the town was justly noted.

The committee, with sighs of relief and happiness at the fine impression the town was making on the honored guest, settled down to relax and enjoy the luxurious feed at the International Hotel. Toasts were made to the new Governor. Speeches were made in abundance. Terrapin, oys-

ters, pheasant, and other delicacies, all imported from San Francisco, were served. Gallons of champagne were consumed. Virginia City was doing it up right—and, at the same time, proving to Governor Nye that they were a peace-loving group of folks. Why, not one man had been killed since the Governor arrived. . . .

For once, the committee told each other, in gleeful whispers, the leopard had changed his spots. No town could behave more sensibly.

At five o'clock the Governor arose to make his official speech.

First proposing a glowing toast to the Nevada Territory in general, and Virginia City in particular, the Governor continued. "First, I must say that this town has been much maligned—fled about—in the East. I expected to witness violence, but instead I witness—"

Three shots rang out to halt the Governor's speech. Down at the far end of the long dining table there was a commotion. Deputy Sheriff John Williams, in reaching for the last piece of pheasant on a plate, found that Bill Swansea had grabbed it first. Williams stood up, pulled his gun, and fired three quick shots at Swansea's head. All three bullets plowed through the target.

THE Governor stood horror-stricken while the corpse was removed and the gun-slinging deputy hauled off to jail by his boss, the sheriff himself.

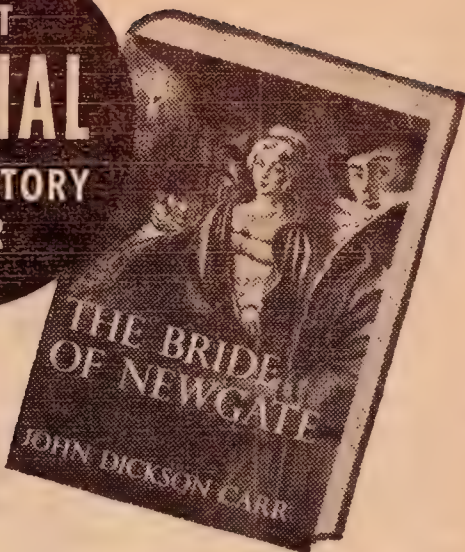
Governor Nye never did finish his speech. Instead, he sat quietly gulping glass after glass of champagne for the next several hours. . . .

Virginia City had tried, and tried hard, to make a good impression.

Despite the killing right under the new Governor's very eyes, the town rigidly controlled itself and made another noble gesture in honor of Governor Nye—they did not lynch the murderous deputy sheriff until the Governor had left town. ● ● ●



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City Zone..... State.....

-WITH HIS



Jenny spoke up from behind the coach. She had Charley's sawed-off shotgun in her hands. . . .

BOOTS ON!

By MARVIN DeVRIES

***Stampeded by fear and violence,
Camptown citizens gave Nevada
Kell the choice of running out on
his friends, or staying for one last
dance—beneath the sheltering
hang-tree!***

CHAPTER

Hangman's Send-Off

1

Nevada Kell checked out of the hotel early in the morning. "I don't think I left anything behind," he told the clerk. "If I did, send it over to Su Shiu."

"The Chinese laundryman?"

"Yeah. He'll store it."

"You're early for the stage," the clerk told him.

Nevada gave him a wry look. "I don't want to miss it. I got my notice, you know."



"So I heard."

Nevada got it out and spread it on the counter, his long dark hands holding it down for the hotel clerk to read. The message was brief. NOT WANTED—it read—and it was signed with a rude skull and cross-bones, the official signature of the Camptown Committee for Law and Order. "I understand it's a rule they have that you've got to take the first stage out whichever way it goes, or you get your neck stretched five minutes later. So I got up early."

The clerk shook his head. "I didn't think they would make you jump."

"I'm on my way."

"I hear Del Stanger got one, too."

"Yeah. I think that's odd. What d'you do at those meetings, pick some names out of a hat?"

"You got me wrong, Nevada," the clerk said with a smoky look. "I don't belong."

Nevada went out without insisting and started for the stage depot. He passed the Mecca, his favorite howling place here in Camptown, and wondered with a small ache if Jenny Dallas knew he was going, and if, by any chance, she would care. He wondered if he was right about the clerk. He didn't see how the so-called Committee would ever have gotten onto him unless they had access to his room. And he wondered, too, if this trip he was taking would get him what he was after. As the clerk had suggested, he didn't jump easy, and this trip was more his own idea than the Committee's.

He passed the assayer's office, then cut cross-lots to avoid Su Shiu's laundry, and came out at the depot where he immediately got into a small rumpus with Dolph Dixon, who apparently was to be one of the passengers. Dixon called himself a claim broker and made frequent trips to Sacramento on business. He was a big man and a fancy dresser. He was standing in the center of the board walk, teetering back and forth on his heels, his hands behind him, a fat cigar in his mouth. Nevada Kell was coming toward him from one direction, and Little Yo, a Chinese laundry pick-up boy, was coming from the other way.

• Little Yo looked ready to stand aside for anyone who gave him a hard look, but he was loaded down with a big bag of laundry

that took him anywhere it wanted to, and he crashed head-on into Dixon. Dixon flew off the handle. "Dammit, boy, look where you're going!" he bellowed and gave the boy a hard shove.

Yo fell on his side. The bag of laundry hit the ground and exploded. Dixon gave it a kick and scattered the contents. Yo scurried around trying to gather them together. Dixon kicked again, and this time his boot clattered against Yo's hand. Yo let out a yip and jumped back.

"Lay off, for Pete's Sake," Nevada Kell objected. "Who d'you think you are?"

"You mind your own business," Dixon told him. He kicked again and the rest of the bundle flew apart, but a small heavy sack, the core of the bundle, stayed on the board walk. Yo jumped for it, but Dixon got it first and opened the pucker-string. Inside, as Nevada knew there would be, was a small hoard of gold dust. "The thieving rascal!" Dixon howled.

"Hold your horses," Nevada told him. "Who does it belong to, Yo?"

The boy mentioned a Chinese name, and Nevada nodded. "Let him have it, Dixon. It's all right. That's their way."

Instead, Dixon turned it upside-down and let the dust pour out. Nevada's blood boiled, but before he could move a man by the name of Hasker stepped out of the crowd under the depot awning and asked Dixon if he was having some trouble. Dixon shook his head, and said, "I don't think so."

"Get aboard," Hasker told Nevada, and put his hand on his gun. "We don't want trouble here."

Another man came forward. His name was Crone. He took his place at Kell's other shoulder, but had nothing to say. Hasker was the talker. He started in on a long lingo, but before he was half through Nevada circled around them and went on to the coach.

A wedding party arrived and indulged in a lot of tomfoolery at the expense of the newlyweds. Evidently they intended to stay at Trinity House over night, and one joker was giving the groom suggestive hints to be used on arrival. Nevada wondered if he had enough fun left inside himself ever to go through something like that of his own free will and accord.

However, he was more interested in another part of the crowd, the scattering of

Committee-men, or vigilantes, to which Hasker and Crone belonged. He could pick them out like blackberries on a bush. They all looked self-consciously grim, pursuing a grave duty imposed on them from on high, and to emphasize their intentions a noosed rope hung over the lowest limb of a nearby tree. It looked silly and theatrical, but it was solemnly meant, and Nevada knew it would have been used on him if he had missed the stage.

"That's a big noise, Nevada," Charley Peek, the stage-coach Jehu spoke up when he saw Nevada looking at the rope, "and I hear it's hollerin' right at you."

"They do it up brown," Nevada admitted.

"I will say it brings the passengers out on time," Charley stated.

"I was here half an hour early," Nevada said. "I wouldn't miss this trip for anything."

"I'll bet you wouldn't."

"I wonder if they would actually go through with it if I didn't go?" Nevada asked.

"There's one way to find out," Charley said.

Nevada pulled a face. "I don't think I'll try it."

ALWAYS one to buck a top dog, Charley, as a show of favor, invited Nevada to ride topside with him. Nevada accepted and climbed up. Su Shiu, watching from his laundry, waved cheerfully, and Nevada waved back. The newlyweds, Mr. and Mrs. Newcomb, climbed into the coach in a shower of rice and hilarious remarks. Charley picked up the reins.

"You better hold it a minute, Charley," Dolph Dixon called up. "I understand we're going to have another passenger."

"Who?"

"Del Stanger."

"Did he get his walking papers, too?"

"So I understand."

Charley grumbled at the delay, but he waited. "I'll count to ten. If he ain't here by then, he can hang for all of me." He started counting in a loud cracked voice, and got up to five when a sudden burp interrupted the proceedings. A pained look shot across his face. "Oh, my," he complained, putting his hand to his stomach, "—six, seven, eight—"

Del Stanger got in under the wire. He didn't have a look or a word for anyone, and brushed past Dixon as if he had a personal grudge against him. "That was a close squeak, Stanger," Charley called down. "You just made it, I'm sorry to say. I couldn't count as fast as usual."

Stanger climbed in, and Charley kicked at the brake lever.

"Wait a minute," Nevada spoke up. "Here comes one more."

"I'm through waitin'."

"It's Jenny Dallas."

"Oh, oh," Charley sounded surprised. He turned to look, and called the length of Broad Street: "Did you get your walkin' papers, too, Jenny?"

Jenny Dallas waved her hand. She was an oddity in Camptown, a lady faro dealer at the Mecca where Nevada often matched his huck against hers, and admired her dark and sultry looks. He admired her now as she came down the walk, a sun umbrella no bigger than a plate hanging on her shoulder. A Negro with a baggage truck followed her. She took her time, and even Charley, with his disgusting timetable habits, didn't complain. Dixon tried to be gallant, but she brushed past him without a look. "I served myself with walking papers," she called up to Charley. "Will you help Willie with the trunk?"

"I will," Nevada answered, climbing down. "Charley's got the burps."

She paid Willie handsomely for his trouble and brought tears to his eyes. Her own softened a little, and she put her hand on his arm. "I'll probably be in some gambling joint in Sacramento," she told him. "If they change the unlucky color from yellow to black around here, come and look me up. I'll find a place for you." She gave the grim loafers a scathing look, then started to climb into the coach. She stopped on the step, then backed down again. "I'm not going to sit in there with Stanger," she objected. "The idea!"

"Oh, for Heaven's Sake, Jenny," Nevada muttered, "don't be fussy."

"I'm not going to ride clear to Trinity House with that man under my nose," she stated, bluntly.

"All right, I'll change with him, if you can stand me," Nevada offered.

"No," Charley put in. "I don't want Stanger up here. The both of you come up

here. I suppose that will be all right."

"How on earth can I get up there?" Jenny said. "I'm stayed up from head to foot."

"Climb up," Charley told her. "That's what we all do."

Nevada gave her a boost from behind, and she made it without much trouble. Nevada followed her up. Dixon had a last-minute word with Hasker and climbed in. Charlie popped his whip and took them away. Nevada took a last look at the empty noose hanging from the tree and wondered bleakly how far he would have to go to take it down.

IN AND OUT of town, a stagecoach Jehu ought to put on flash and style. Charley tried it, but mules aren't stylish, and his six-up team looked like nothing but mules in a hurry. Everybody stopped to watch, however. Su Shiu lifted his hat to Nevada: as if his going meant something grave and solemn. Little Yo, still dodging, stood behind him, and lifted a shy hand. Nevada waved back. Jenny Dallas, as if she had her head in stays, too, looked straight ahead. She said she didn't want to see any more of this crumby town.

"I'll bet you're leavin' because Stanger got kicked out," Charley hoorawed her.

Jenny made an indignant sound. "No, I'm leaving because they kicked out Nevada," she stated, frankly.

Nevada grinned and bowed a little. "No, not really?"

"I did, too."

"Nevada's a no-good bum, Jenny," Charley put in. "That's why they gave him the boot. Don't get fond of anybody like him."

"Gosh, this is so sudden," Nevada remarked.

"Oh, fiddlesticks!"

"He robs claims," Charley went on. "He's loaded with cash all the time, an' nobody can account for it."

"I know his business," Jenny said.

"You do?" This time Nevada sounded seriously surprised.

"Yes. You're a gold-dust runner for Su Shiu."

"I am?"

"Yes."

Charley believed it, even though Nevada didn't seem to. "So that's why you got

kicked out of Camptown," he cackled.

"I don't follow you," Nevada said.

Charley explained that the Camptown Committee for Law and Order were actually a bunch of claim jumpers, hiding behind this high-sounding title. "They're out to badger all the Wong-Wang-Woos off the creek one way or another. Then they grab the claims or buy 'em for scare prices and they're in business."

"How d'you know all that?" Nevada asked.

"I sit here thinkin' the live-long day." He spoke to the mules and headed into the ford across the gold creek. "Look at 'em. That creek used to be loaded with Chinks, nothin' else. Now there's only a scatter left, and it ain't because the gold's run out."

Story had it that the discovery was made by two Chinese fleeing the law in far-off Sacramento, hence it got the name of Chinamen's Creek. Later, a horde of Orientals poured in. Now, only a small group of the hardest remained. "I give 'em another month," Charley said, as if the situation were something to be regretted. Then he added, "Not that I hold with Chinks."

"No," Nevada drawled. "Why don't they stay to home? Damned laundrymen."

Charley gave him a slant-eyed look, evidently suspicious of his sincerity. He burped again and got a startled look on his face. "My, my. Excuse me, Jenny."

"What's wrong with you, anyhow?" Jenny asked.

"My stomach's been cuttin' capers. Indigestion." He got the mules through the shallow ford and up the long slant, and the rest of it was clear sailing all the way to Trinity Tollhouse. So he said, but his eyes roved the far distances, and a pair of horse-men on a slanting course from east to northwest held his attention a long time. He lifted his hand to his forehead to shade his eyes and watched until they fell away behind the roll of the land.

Nevada laughed. "Weller & Motts Jehu scouting for Injuns," he remarked. "Somebody ought to paint your picture, Charley."

"So?" He didn't change his pose.

"You've got nothing to worry about, Charley. Injuns don't like mules."

"Half-breeds do."

"I take it you mean Utah Ball."

Charley nodded. "Don't mention the name. I shake in my boots."

"Hmmp," Nevada muttered.

"It's a fact. That hombre's a throwback clear to Black Hawk."

"Don't scare Jenny," Nevada scolded.

This time Jenny said, "Hmmp."

Charley lowered his hand. It was some time before he spoke again, as if it took some doing to get Utah Ball out of his head. Then he said, "You sure take the cake, Nevada. I had no idea you were running dust for the Chinks."

"Leave it to Jenny to tell you about it," Nevada said. He stretched and yawned, his lean jaw, shaded with the persistent nuisance of dark whiskers, clamping shut at the end of it so his teeth clicked.

"I'm surprised you ain't got your head shot off long ago," Charley went on.

"Me, too," Nevada agreed.

"It's been tried," Jenny spoke up.

"Is that right?" Nevada asked, innocently.

"Here we go again," Charley remarked. "Who tried it, Jenny?"

"Can they hear us down in the coach?" Jenny asked.

Charley shook his head. "Not unless you yell."

Jenny didn't yell, but she mentioned Stanger's name. "He was hired by those no-good vigilantes to kill Nevada Kell. Nevada knows it just as well as I do."

"For a lady, Jenny," Nevada remarked, "you hear an awful lot of dirt."

"Yeah, but this time it don't make sense," Charley stated. "If the vigilantes hired him to kill you, why are they kicking him out of Camptown now? They might wait till he could make a good job of it."

"I can answer that, too," Jenny said. "They ordered him to find out where Nevada carried the gold dust. That's what they're after. Stanger found out and told them, and now they're through with him."

"You sure do a lot of thinking about me, don't you, Jenny," Nevada remarked.

"I sure do. But I didn't think you would run."

"Are you disappointed?"

Jenny pursed her lips. "I think you've got a reason."

"Why, sure. I didn't like the looks of that hangnoose."

"No, that isn't it."

"You tell me then."

"I can't."

"Huh. One thing she doesn't know about me."

"But I'll find out."

"Yeah. I'll tell you right now. I'm here because Stanger is. He knows that vigilante setup, or he ought to. I'm looking for the big gun, and I aim to get it out of him. When I do, I'm going back to Camptown and tell him what I think—with a gun."

"Holy Smokes, Nevada, ain't you ever got enough?" Charley muttered. "You must think an almighty lot of those Chinks."

Nevada shrugged. "Some I like and some I don't, just like anybody else. But I don't like to have vigilantes, fake or real, breathing down my neck. I'm makin' war."

"That's the stuff," Jenny cheered, a little dubiously.

"Yeah," Charley agreed, "the stuff they make corpses of."

TRINITY HOUSE stood deep down in a spectacular gorge. Hairpin turns gouged out with dynamite or built up with talus snaked down to the place. At the bottom the road ran straight across the gorge to Trinity House and the toll bridge, which was making a fortune for One-Buck Trinity. He had captured the traffic from Camptown, and Hatter's Ford, further up the gorge, had been abandoned by all except old man Hatter. A willow-grown fork still led that way along the near wall.

Camptown was a long day behind, and the mules showed it, ears slanting like sagging fence posts, eyes filled with reproof at being imposed upon. Charley gave them a long breather on the rim before starting down. "I like to let 'em get their wind and then scoot down here," he said.

He had had a hard time of it himself with his uneasy stomach. Nevada had offered to spell him several times when he was in the midst of an attack, but Charley wouldn't admit he was in trouble and refused the offer.

Jenny looked out and flustered. She had thrown her giddy umbrella away and threatened to do the same for her stays as soon as they reached Trinity House.

"I've always wondered why women think they'll fall apart if they don't get somethin' good an' hard around 'em to hold 'em together."

"We do fall apart," Jenny told him.

"I never seen any pieces," Charley said, and kicked off the brakes. "Hang onto your hats, folks," he sang out, and started down. "*Git* now, you sons of hell!"

The mules minced over the rocky road-bed, and wheels skidded around the first turn, coming within an inch of the drop-off. Nevada pulled a face. "This ought to give a man religion," he grumbled.

"Better'n six parsons and a row of Sundays," Charley agreed. All at once, a stricken look came over his face. He lurched back, trying to straighten out the kinks in his stomach. He kicked at the brake, but his foot slid past the lever. Then he collapsed and slumped down to the footboard. The reins slid out of his finger, and Nevada grabbed before they got out of reach. Sweat popped out on his face. Jenny slid down and hung onto Charley.

"Lord's Sake, Charley, take it easy," Newcomb, the bridegroom called out, "You want to kill us all?"

It was a long fast drop, and it turned into a near runaway. Nevada kept one foot on the brake lever, trying to keep the coach off the heels of the wheelers. Jenny braced her legs wherever she could get a hold, and hung onto Charley's pants' belt. When the stags finally rolled around the last turn and headed into the straightaway, Nevada eased up on the brake and got his breath back.

Trinity House and the toll bridge were still half a mile away across the gorge. At the fork that swung to George Hatter's ford, Nevada pulled up and tried to get Charley back on the seat. In the end, he had to put him up with the baggage. "He's a goner," he told Jenny, his voice filled with stunned dismay. "I had no idea."

Jenny nodded. "I know. Let's go on."

He started forward again, still unaware that something was wrong at Trinity House, but before he was definitely committed to the Trinity road, a man stepped out of the willow bushes ahead and silently waved his hat in a circle around his head. It was an old trail signal to warn approaching riders to keep away, and Nevada heeded it. He stopped the mules, and now for the first time saw smoke billowing up from Trinity House. "What's wrong?" he called.

The man in the road tried to come forward, but he took only a few steps before he sagged to his knees. He swung his hat

in a circle again and clawed at his throat. "What's wrong?" Nevada called, again.

"Raid—raid," the man finally answered, trying to be wary, but still trying to make himself heard. "Clear out. It's Ball. Utah Ball. Get those people away. There's nothing you can do."

Nevada swung the mules across the Y in the direction of Hatter's Ford, but before he could get the coach out of sight, one of the raiders spotted the man in the road and came after him. The man in the road crept into the brush on all fours. Nevada started to get down. Then another raider showed up and fired a shot that ripped into the coach. He took aim once more, but before he could fire again Nevada used the whip and dug out.

CHAPTER

2

Hatter's Ford

It took an hour to reach Hatter's Ford. The place had fallen into disuse since One-Buck Trinity built his place and diverted all the Camptown traffic. Hatter kept up the pretense of being in business, but he made his living catching wild horses. Now, the trap pasture where he kept them was empty, and the house where he lived was a smouldering ruin. Hatter's servant, Will, lay on the ground near the ford, his fuzzy scalp gone, his naked feet making an idle stir in the water.

Hatter himself was still alive. He sat on a stump holding together the ragged edges of a knife wound in his leg. "Go to Trinity's," he called out when the stage stopped. "We're having some trouble here."

"We just got away from there, Hatter," Nevada told him. "They got hit, too." To Jenny Dallas he said, "He sounds a little off."

"Utah Ball came this way," Hatter stated.

The stage coach emptied like a pesthouse. Dolph Dixon was out first. He looked angry. "Why didn't you go in to Trinity's?" he demanded. "We could've given him some help."

"That's one way of looking at it," Nevada conceded. "Now I don't think we ought to spend much time here, folks. The raiders saw us come this way. Get a drink at the river and I'll water the mules. We ought to—"

"What hit Charley?" Dixon broke in. "His stomach, I reckon. He just keeled over and died."

"No accommodations for travelers here, folks," Hatter called out. "You'll have to go to Trinity's."

"Jenny, you see what you can do for him," Nevada said. "I'll water the mules."

"You hadn't ought to water those mules now," Dixon stated. "They're overheated."

"What else can I do? There's no water to be had till we get back to Camptown." He drove them forward into the water and let them drink.

The newlyweds walked to the river together, circling wide around the scalped man. Newcomb scooped up water and let his bride drink out of his cupped hands. More stay trouble, Nevada thought. Dixon had a collapsible cup to use. Nevada had a hard time turning the mules out of the water in such cramped quarters, but he finally got them back onto dry land. Then he went back and got a drink for himself. "Do you think there's any danger?" the new bride asked him. She had found a souvenir arrow and carried it in her hand. "I think Indians are awful, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Nevada agreed. "It's certainly a shame to spoil your honeymoon."

Jenny Dallas helped Hatter to the coach. She had bandaged his leg with a piece of her white petticoat. The lace edging still showed. Dixon got in, but Stanger waited for Nevada. "So you're figuring on heading back for Camptown," he remarked, falling in step with him.

"That's the general idea," Nevada told him. "Any objections?"

"Why, yes," Stanger said. "There's a rope back there waiting for me. And one for you. Ain't you thought of that?"

"Yeah, I've thought of it. But I've kind of stepped into Charley's boots, and I reckon that's what he would try to do. I feel kind of obliged, with women aboard."

"Well, I'm not going."

"What're you going to do?"

"I'll take one of the mules and go my own way."

Nevada laughed. "No mules for sale. Get inside." He walked on. Stanger followed grudgingly, dropping behind. Nevada said over his shoulder, "The fact is, I want to have a long talk with you."

Stanger didn't answer, but when they reached the coach, he pulled his gun and said, "I don't go. Now get around there and cut out a mule for me."

Nevada turned around. His tongue-tip traveled over his lips. His eyes flicked up and down, calculating risks.

"Try it," Stanger taunted. "Be just as damn' crazy as you please."

"No, I don't think I will," Nevada said. "I know you're a pretty good shot. You've tried your aim on me before. It was quite close."

"You got me wrong," Stanger mumbled. "I don't know what the hell you're talkin' about."

"You'll find out before we get back." Nevada figured Stanger had more than one reason for getting in an uproar. It was true that Camptown vigilantes waited for him with a hangnoose, but there was another sound reason. Stanger had trailed him more than once when he was running out gold dust. Stanger probably knew it went to Trinity House where One-Buck Trinity stored it—for a fee. In all likelihood, Trinity House was now a smouldering ruin, and if Stanger got a mule he would head that way and try to find the gold in the ashes. No, he couldn't turn Stanger loose, not even without a mule.

"You know," he went on, "you've got Utah Ball to think about, too."

"Utah Ball—and me," Jenny spoke up from behind the coach. She had Charley's sawed-off shotgun in her hands. Her cheek lay against the wooden stock and the barrel pointed straight at Del Stanger. "That damned thing ain't even loaded," Stanger flared.

It was probably bluff. He didn't know any more about it than anybody else, but he swung his eyes at Jenny for a second, and Nevada lunged.

Stanger's gun roared, and the bitter smoke stung Nevada's nose. But the bullet didn't touch him, and Stanger didn't get a second chance. Nevada's boot hit his arm between wrist and elbow, and the gun whirled away. In spite of her stays, Jenny moved fast and scooped it off the ground before Stanger could get it back. Stanger threw a rock, but it went wide and hit the coach. Then he got his feet under him and came in. Nevada pulled his gun, but it didn't hold Stanger back, and Nevada

threw it away. *I want him on the hoof*, he thought, and got set.

Fist fighting wasn't Stanger's long suit. He needed a gun to make him worth his salt, but he did get off a punch that scraped Nevada's ear and knocked off his hat. Nevada sent one back and Stanger's teeth snapped like a beartrap. Another caught him on the jaw. A third landed on the side of his head and brought him to a dead stop. His eyes glazed. His head wilted. His knees gave, and he toppled to the ground in a senseless heap.

"Why didn't you use your gun on him?" Jenny complained.

"Why didn't you?"

"Because it is empty."

Nevada grinned and rubbed his fist. "Jenny, you're quite a sidekick. I don't know what would've happened if you hadn't been around."

"I do," she told him.

Nevada stowed Stanger inside. "Does anybody else have a weapon?" he asked.

Newcomb, the bridegroom, shook his head. So did Dixon. Hatter had one, but he wouldn't give it up, and Nevada didn't want to make a fuss about it. "If Stanger tries to get it," Nevada said, "knock him dead."

"Leave it to me," Dixon said, and Newcomb nodded.

Nevada gave Jenny a boost up the wheel and climbed up beside her. He picked up the reins and looked at the looming wall. "If this climb is as bad as Trinity's, I'm glad we're going up instead of down." Aping Charley, he called out, "Hang onto your hats, folks," and started rolling.

FOR YEARS, Utah Ball's infamy had hung over the country like a cloud. These raids, like the one down the Rouge Gorge, were rare, but they were sudden and devastating, and the surprising thing to Nevada was that Hatter had escaped with his life. Trinity House had probably fared worse, and it was most likely that Weller & Mott's stage coach would get a taste of it, too. It worried Nevada, because he had stepped into Charley's boots and taken over Charley's responsibilities. However, he didn't lose sight of the fact that he had fish of his own to fry, and it could cost him his life as suddenly as anything Utah Ball had to offer.

It didn't seem far-fetched to him to tie the raid and the gold dust cache at Trinity House together. It didn't seem too far-fetched to consider it, at any rate, and to consider the notion that somebody might have set Utah Ball in motion so the gold dust would be easy to get at. He even considered the timing. If Utah Ball had been bought and paid for, had it been intended that Charley was to run head-on into the raid? So far as he knew, there were four men who knew the gold dust was at Trinity House, and he mentioned them in his mind in the order of their importance to him—Nevada Kell, Su Shiu, One-Buck Trinity, and Del Stanger. If Stanger knew, then a fifth man might know, and that would be the man who had hired Stanger to trail Nevada and shoot him down when the sign was right. *That's the man I'm looking for*, he thought, and wondered bleakly if he would ever find him.

"Do you think we'll get back to Camp-town?" Jenny broke in on his thoughts.

Nevada shrugged. "I don't know. If I were one of those mules, I'd quit. In fact, I think they're getting the idea."

"I do, too."

"That was a very nice hand you played at Hatter's, Jenny." He put his hand on hers. "I look at Mrs. Newcomb—Dolly, that is—and I look at you, and it shocks me to think you're both women. There ought to be different words."

"Make some up, Nevada. I would like to hear something nice from you."

Nevada didn't try. "It seems to me the Newcombs looked kind of disgruntled. They didn't look scared, but just put out. I wonder what they were thinking about."

"Lost opportunities, perhaps."

Nevada laughed. "I wouldn't be surprised. Makes a man think he hadn't ought to let too many go past."

Charley's boots, sticking out between them, nudged her arm when the coach lurched, and she tried to get away from it. Then she suddenly covered her face with her hands, and her shoulders shook with dismay.

"I'll try to get things organized a little at the first stop," Nevada told her.

"It's not that. I just don't want to go back. I don't want you to go back."

"You take after Stanger," he told her, deliberately trying to make her mad. "He's

scared stiff to go back to that hangrope."

"Well, why wouldn't he be?" she flared. "You ought to be, too."

"Oh, I don't know. We can't help ourselves. They ought to take that into consideration. Anyway, I was aiming to go back. It's just happening quicker than I thought it would."

"You can't go up against those vigilantes, Nevada. You don't know who they are. You don't know how they'll come at you."

"I'll know more by the time we get there. All I want is the name of one man. That'll do the business. It's always one man, pushing a thing like that along."

HATTER'S FORK was rougher than the road to Trinity House. Nevada couldn't recall exactly where they came together. He shaded his eyes with his hand, like Charley had done, and watched the yellow horizon. The road skirted a dry-wash, and the mules threw their long shadows clear across it. Once, one of them went on its nose, but Nevada got it up and kept going. Just before deep dark, he found a place where the steep cutbank flattened out, and he turned into the wash. With a rush, mules and coach went down out of sight, and Nevada pulled them to a stop.

Newcomb jumped out, shaking his fist. "God, man, can't you be a little careful? You threw Dolly into a vapor."

Nevada climbed down. "She takes the turns down the gorge without a peep and has a vapor down a cut bank. That's silly, Newcomb."

"It may be silly, but it's so."

"Give her some water."

"Where will I get water?"

"That's right. Well, scout around for some whiskey." He turned to the others. "I think we can make up our minds to lay over here till morning. There's nothing left in those mules, and it's probably the safest place to be."

"I don't like it," Hatter said from inside the coach. "How you going to get back out?"

Hmmm, Nevada thought, *that boy's comin' back fast!* Two kit foxes began yapping back and forth at a far distance, and Nevada tried to decide whether it was the real thing, or Utah Ball in disguise. Later, a coyote joined in, and odd little off-pitch sounds made him think it was Utah

Ball's renegades talking it up. Then, again, he thought it was the real thing. The faint hint of a moon began to show in the east. A sharp skunk odor filled the wash. "We ought to have a stakeout on the rim, Dixon," Nevada mentioned. "I wonder if you would oblige. I'll relieve you later and let Newcomb take a whack at it, too, if he can tear himself away from Dolly."

"That's all right," Dixon said, agreeably. "But I think I ought to have a gun."

Nevada gave him Stanger's. "Don't let Stanger get hold of it, that's all," he warned. "He's scared stiff to go back, and might try to pull a fast one."

"He better not try it on me," Dixon boasted, and climbed out of the wash.

Jenny walked toward the willows that lined the dry creek-bed and sat down on a rock. Nevada followed her and wrapped her up in Charley's mackinaw. "I ought to get those mules out of harness, but I don't know if I dare. We could hobble 'em, but there's always Stanger to think of. He's up and around again."

Give me a gun and I'll watch Stanger," Jenny said.

"I don't have one to spare. I wonder where that bloomin' skunk is. I mean, the real one. It smells to high Heaven." He saw Stanger coming toward them and raised his voice, "You raising that smell, Stanger?"

Stanger came toward them, his jaw cupped in his hand. "No, I'm not." He sat down cross-legged on the ground, wrapped up in gloom. "You knocked my head to pieces, Kell," he stated, "but I guess I had it comin'. I don't hold it against you." He let the words slide out between his lips with as little movement as possible.

"That certainly is big of you," Nevada said.

"You don't need to worry about the mules," Stanger went on. "I'll leave 'em alone. But I want my gun."

Nevada shook his head. "Everybody wants a gun, Stanger. I don't have any to spare."

"You got mine."

"No, I gave it to Dixon." Nevada heard Stanger's breath whip in and out of him at the statement. He could almost hear his nerves suddenly start to sing.

"I want to talk to you—in private, Kell," Stanger stated, finally.

"No," Nevada told him. "Jenny's my sidekick. If you got anything to say, go ahead and say it."

"He'll butcher us, butcher us to hell." It didn't sound as if Stanger meant anyone to hear it. It was more like a moan, filled with stark terror, coming from deep down inside of him, and it brought a puzzled frown to Nevada's face.

"Who are you talking about?" he asked, and held his breath for the answer.

Stanger's voice went down to a whisper when he mentioned the name, and Nevada had to ask him to repeat it. "Dixon," Stanger repeated, his voice sliding up out of control.

Nevada looked at Jenny. Then he felt for the makings, intending to roll a smoke, but he let it go before he found them. "I don't know what to make of that, Stanger," he said, finally.

"He's telling you what you want to know," Jenny put in.

"Oh." He heard a small noise not far away, and tried to identify it. It didn't come again. "Go ahead, Stanger. Go ahead."

Stanger claimed Dixon was his boss, the head of the so-called Camptown Committee for Law and Order. He was the big noise in the secret campaign to drive the Chinese off the gold creek. "He hired me to find out where you cached the gold. The only mistake I made was that I told him."

"That doesn't sound like much sense," Nevada agreed, but he was still skeptical of the whole story. "You didn't mention that he hired you to kill me, Stanger. That was part of the deal, too, wasn't it?"

"It was."

"Well, if it'll do you any good, I can tell him you tried."

"It's nothin' to be funny about now. Whether you like it or not, you're on my side."

"I don't see that either."

"For heaven's sake, let him go on, Nevada," Jenny protested.

"It's fishy, Jenny."

"You're on my side because you know where the gold is," Stanger went on. "Anybody who knows that is a dead duck. That goes for Su Shiu too. Hell, what do you think that Utah Ball raid was? We were supposed to run into it head-on and get massacred. Dixon paid Utah Ball to stage

it, but it went wrong when you saw the man in the road and swung off to Hatter's."

THIS was something Nevada had thought of without considering it too far-fetched, but now when he heard the same thing from someone else, he couldn't swallow it. "It stinks, Stanger. Why the raid on Hatter's? Tell me that."

"Just to make the one on Trinity House look good. Utah Ball came to Camptown and took his orders straight from Dixon."

"Why was Dixon on the coach if he knew what we were going to run into? Utah Ball could finish him off with the rest of us and grab the gold dust for himself."

"That renegade don't know it's there. Besides, Dixon had two men posted at Trinity's. They were at the depot in Camptown when we left. Their names are Hasker and Crone. I saw 'em ride around us."

Hmm, so did I, Nevada thought. So did Charley when he was striking a pose.

"They were to give Dixon a hand with the gold dust after the raid. They had a spare horse for him and he was going to take it on to Sacramento."

"How could Dixon explain it if he got off scot-free and the rest of us got slaughtered?"

"Things like that happen. You got to believe me."

"Frankly, I don't. You had a gun all day and Dixon didn't. Why didn't you use it on him?"

"I intended to. I was going to make my own play for that dust."

"Yeah, and that's what you're still doing. It doesn't hold water, Stanger. If you got a gun, you'd grab a mule and be on your way straight for Trinity House. Burned or not, the gold's still there, and that's what you want."

"You got to believe me," Stanger breathed, his voice rough with concern. "Godamighty, you put a gun in Dixon's hand!"

"If he was up to all this skullduggery, he'd carry one of his own." He straightened suddenly and cupped his hand around his ear, listening for the repetition of a small sound he had heard.

Jenny had heard it, too. "Maybe it's that skunk," she said in a low voice.

Nevada moved in the direction he thought the sound had come from. It might have been what Jenny said, but he didn't think so. It was a heavier sound, perhaps like a man missing his step on uneven ground. The creek-bed was dry, but a ribbon of green willows, head-high to a man, lined the banks.

Nevada crossed the creek and got into the willows on the other side. He flushed out something that put the willows into sudden commotion, but he couldn't see what it was. He couldn't find out where it came from. Stones cascaded into the creek-bed behind him and he went back to look at that. He had probably started it himself climbing out. He followed the creek watching both sides. He stopped at intervals to listen, squatting to look through the twigs where the leafage was thin.

A night bird of some kind swished past his head, setting up a flutter of air. He thought of the souvenir arrow Dolly Newcomb had found at Hatter's; and wondered if Utah Ball's renegades with their rifles and their bows and arrows were on top of them. An arrow would make the same kind of flutter.

In the end, he found nothing, and started back toward the stagecoach. The top of it was skylighted above the cutbank. He couldn't see the rest of it. A mule stomped, and he thought he heard the coach door squeak open and close again. He swung that way and looked in. "Everything all right in here?" he asked.

Dolly Newcomb answered. "Hatter snores," she complained. "I can't stand it. Why can't we go on?"

"The mules had a tough day," Nevada told her. "You there, Newcomb?"

"Yeah," Newcomb answered, sleepily. "What d'you want?"

"Nothing at all. Just checking up. You feeling better, Mrs. Newcomb?"

"Very weak." Her voice got tiny, all of a sudden.

"It will probably pass," Nevada answered. "Have you got any room in here for Miss Dallas?"

"I—I don't see how," Dolly answered, a little fluster in her voice. "I really don't see how. But I'll get out if she wants to come in. I told Ben I would. Didn't I, Ben?"

"Oh, yeah—yeah," Newcomb answered,

quickly taking his cue. "We can get out."

"No," Nevada answered, smothering his sudden anger, "I don't think that will be necessary. One more thing—if Utah Ball shows up, Newcomb, you ought to make up your mind what to do about your bride. Good night."

That ought to hold 'em, he thought, and immediately regretted saying it. He hadn't moved a step when a shot spanged out on the cutbank above him and sent its plunging clamor through the night.

Dolly Newcomb let out a faint scream, and Newcomb mumbled something comforting. Hatter snorted, but didn't seem to come entirely awake.

"What is it?" Newcomb asked through the window.

Nevada shook his head. "Dixon," he called up in a wary voice. "Is that you, Dixon?"

He didn't get an answer and started toward the slant up the cutbank. Then another shot, snapping like a dry bone, raised its own wild din. This time the bullet nipped at Nevada's sleeve, and he dived for cover along the wall of the wash.

CHAPTER

3

Utah Ball!

Dolly Newcomb screamed again. Nevada saw Jenny Dallas coming toward him and told her to keep away. "Where's Stanger?"

"I don't know. He didn't stay with me."

"Get back where you were, Jenny. I don't know what this is. Maybe Dixon got nervous. I'll take a look."

Keeping close to the wall, he reached the slant and looked around. He didn't believe it was anyone getting nervous. He believed it was Stanger's tall tale beginning to come true. Dropping to his knees on the slant so only his head showed above the cutbank, he took a careful look.

The kit foxes began to talk it up again. He thought he could hear the rumble of the Rouge piling through the gorge, but it was a long poke away, and he mistrusted his hearing. The moon was rising in the sky, but shape and shadow blurred too much to separate one from the other. He finally discovered something that looked like a man lying face-down on the ground about fifty feet away, but he wouldn't have

sworn to it. It could just as easily be a bush or rock. Once, he thought he saw it move, but he wasn't convinced. He picked up a stone and threw it, but nothing happened. "Is that you, Dixon?" he called, finally.

"Right over here," Dixon answered from another direction. "Is that you, Kell?"

"Yeah."

"I'm coming in."

"Okey." Nevada shifted his gun in the direction of Dixon's voice, leaving his hand, and gun, flat on the ground.

Dixon came in and sat down on the edge of the cutbank. "I guess I got rattled," he confessed. "I thought I saw something moving out there and fired a couple shots. My nerves started to jump."

Nevada thought this over. "It can happen to anybody," he admitted, finally, "but you did better than you think. There's a guy out there flat on his face, and I think he's dead." He pointed out the place, and Dixon stared a long time.

"He could be playing possum," Nevada went on. "I thought I saw him move once, but I'm not sure."

"That's what I was shooting at," Dixon announced.

Nevada felt of the hole in his sleeve and his dander went up. *What the hell*, he thought, *I might as well put it on the line*. Aloud, he said, "I got a hole in my shirt that says one of those bullets took after me down in the wash. How do you account for that?"

"No, Kell. You must be mistaken." There was a hint of panic in his voice.

"No. Stanger told me all about you, Dixon, you and Utah Ball and all the rest. If I did what I felt like, I would plug you full of holes right here and now. Anyway, my gun's lookin' straight at you, ready to go. Get your hands up and scrounge around. I want your gun."

Dixon obeyed silently. "I never shot at you, Kell," he insisted.

"Get up." Nevada put the spare weapon in his pants' belt. "I wouldn't be surprised if that's Stanger out there. You first took a shot at him and then at me. Anyway, we'll go take a look. Start walkin'."

Nevada had his hands full herding Dixon along into what night turn out to be a trap. It could be Stanger out there. Or, it could be a nestful of Utah Ball renegades using a dead man for bait. In the end, it turned

out to be neither. It was One-Buck Trinity from Trinity House, and there was still a spark of life left in him.

He was half-naked. What clothes he had left smelled scorched. His beard hanging to his waist, like a biblical prophet's, was singed to a stubble. His hair was burned off his head. He wore a gunbelt, but the holster was empty. His hands and knees were raw, as if he had come a long ways on all fours.

"Pick him up, dammit, and carry him in," Nevada ordered. "Don't jolt him either." He gave Dixon a jab with his gun. "Look at him, Dixon. That's your doin'. Don't rile me, or I'll drill you here and now, and carry him in myself." His voice rasped with fury.

Dixon shivered, and picked Trinity up. Jenny met them on the slant and held Trinity's wobbling head until they got him to the coach, but he didn't last long after that. His body was bruised and burned, but he didn't have a bullet mark anywhere on his body.

Near the end, when the first gray streaks of light began to show in the sky, he opened his eyes and recognized Nevada. "Utah Ball burned us out—" he spoke in a whisper, and Nevada had to bend close to his lips to hear, "—I went back into the house for that gold dust I was storing for you, but I couldn't get it. I got singed pretty bad. The dust is still there, so far as I know. You'll find it in a tin box in the ashes."

"I'll find it," Nevada told him. "Don't let it worry you."

"Where's Charley?"

Nevada shook his head. "He was ailing. I had to take over for him."

"I saw you head for Hatter's. I figured you'd turn back to Camptown, so I climbed out and cut down this way. Made it, too." He was short of breath and stopped a while, then went on, "Somebody came toward me, I don't know who. I thought he came to help, but before I could say a word, he dropped me with a rock. I know he took my gun, but that's all I can say. . . ." A gusty breath suddenly rushed out of his throat and his life went with it.

Nevada got up. "Take this gun, Jenny, and keep an eye on Dixon," he said grimly. "Shoot him whenever you get tired of watching."

MEALY light seeped into the wash. Hatter was complaining, and Nevada walked to the coach. "What's the trouble, Hatter?" he asked in a tired voice. "Your leg bothering you?"

"No," Hatter snapped. "Newcomb stole my gun while I was sleeping. I want it back."

"You're crazy," Dolly flared. "He never did."

"You been in here all the time?" Nevada asked her.

"No. We—we walked around. You can ask Ben."

"We'll try and get it for you, Hatter," Nevada promised. "Just take it easy a while." He took a look at the mules and wondered if the rest had done them any good at all.

Newcomb followed him. "Do you think they'll last?" he asked.

"No, I don't," Nevada stated, bluntly. "I think we'll have to walk. Maybe one of the best will carry Hatter. Maybe we could pack Charley a ways. I don't know."

"What about Dolly?"

"What about her?"

"She can't walk that distance."

"She'll learn how," Nevada answered. "Maybe Jenny will show her."

Newcomb looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry about last night. Dolly didn't mean to put on airs."

"Okay—okay." Nevada turned to face him. "You know, Newcomb, if I had caught you snoopin' around last night, I would've shot you." It was a stab in the dark, but it worked.

Newcomb flushed guiltily and kicked at the dirt. "I—I thought you and Stanger were planning to leave us in the lurch."

"It might've been a good idea," Nevada said. "But you heard something quite different, eh?"

"I heard most of it. But I don't believe it's true."

"I don't know that it ought to matter, one way or another, to you."

"But it does," Newcomb said. "You see, I belong to the Camptown vigilantes."

Balls of Fire, another one of them! Nevada thought. "Well, that's interesting," he said, aloud. "I thought I knew most of them. Is Dixon the big push, like Stanger said?"

Newcomb nodded grudgingly, as if it

hurt his conscience to disclose this prime secret.

"Then that much of what Stanger said is true," Nevada went on. "Give him that much credit. And if the rest of it is—"

"But it isn't," Newcomb broke in. "We help the law, that's all. We don't hire killers. We don't persecute those Chinks."

"That's a nice way of looking at it," Nevada said. "Just don't go along with it too far. Where's Hatter's gun?"

Newcomb's eyes drifted down again. "I don't know," he said, and moved away.

Nevada looked at the rest of the mules, one by one, scratching the nose of one of them, running his hand along the stumpy mane of another. The sky was beginning to brighten in the east, but it would still be another hour before full light. Stanger's dug out, he thought. That explains what happened to Trinity. Stanger knocked him on the head, grabbed his gun, and dug. Good riddance to him, anyway.

Then a gun poked him in the back, and Stanger's wary voice came at him from behind, telling him to keep his mouth shut and his hands up. Stanger lifted Nevada's gun from behind, then walked him around the far side of the coach near where Jenny stood.

"Don't mess with him, Jenny," Nevada warned before Stanger said a word. "Drop the gun. He's got the bulge."

"You're tootin'," Stanger crowed. He stepped away from Nevada and scooped up the gun Nevada had taken from him at Hatter's.

Nevada moved toward Jenny. He noticed she had gotten rid of her stays during the night, and she wasn't falling apart either. Dixon was trying to slant away, but Stanger stopped him. Newcomb stood near the coach, but if he had Hatter's gun, he didn't try to use it. Dixon came back and spoke to him, but Nevada couldn't catch what was said.

"Don't anybody give me any trouble," Stanger warned them. "I got enough guns to go to work on everybody."

"You were lucky running into Trinity," Nevada remarked, looking at the plow-handle weapon.

"I sure was," Stanger agreed. "Pennies from Heaven. I'll take a mule now, Kell. Cut out one that'll stand up a while." He moved around a little so he could keep

them all under his gun. "Get me one of those leaders. They look the best."

Nevada picked out one of the leaders and took off the harness. He left the bridle and switched over the gee rein from the other leader, cut the leather behind the hook-up, and led the animal out. Stanger got aboard. "I'd spook the rest of them," he announced. "I don't want anybody to tail me, but they won't spook far enough. So. . ."

He rode to the other leader, put his gun to the animal's head, and shot it down.

"Hold it, Stanger," Nevada roared. "You can't—"

"Watch yourself, Kell," Stanger warned. "You're nip an' tuck in my book, anyway. One more step, and you go down."

NEVADA didn't move, and Stanger went on with the grisly business. The mules brayed and reared and kicked, but one by one they went down, and when he was finished Stanger holstered his gun and ran his mule toward Dixon. "You come with me a little ways, you mealy-mouthed, double-crossin' buzzard."

Dixon's face turned white. He glanced at Newcomb, claiming help of some kind, but Newcomb had none to give. Dixon didn't move fast enough, and Stanger swung his mule to get at him from behind and kick him in the rump.

Dixon stumbled forward. Stanger drew one of his guns again, broke it, pocketed the cartridges, and threw it down. "There you are, Kell. Let it be till we clear out. That's for the good hitch you gave me on the mule. You're hell-bent to get to Camp-town, and I hope you make it. Happy hanging, and tell the Chinks I'll make good use of their dust." Then he put his mule into a sorry lope, kicking Dixon along every time he caught up with him. They went up the slant that way and disappeared over the rim.

Nevada picked up the gun and loaded it from his belt. One mule still kicked and brayed, and Nevada finished what Stanger had begun. "Newcomb, I reckon you and I better get busy digging a grave, if we can get into this ground. This is as far as Charley and Trinity go. Take the coach shovel. Jenny, you and Mrs. Newcomb better go through your grips and find out what you want to keep. Don't make it much. Maybe you can come back later for

the rest. Hatter, do you think you could get up there on the rim and keep an eye on things? Holler if you see anything."

Hatter thought he could and stumbled away, but he was still growling about his gun. "I don't know what we're going to do about him," Nevada muttered. "He can't walk a mile, and we can't very well bury him."

"Dolly'll die," Newcomb breathed.

"We'll keep the shovel handy," Nevada told him sourly. He paused a moment, then said, "I'm sorry. It's just that things seem to be piling up."

"We ought to do something for Dixon," Newcomb breathed.

"Why?"

"Stanger's going to kill him."

"I reckon so," Nevada agreed. "Why didn't you take a hand when Dixon asked you to, if you've got Hatter's gun."

Newcomb bit his lip. "I didn't have it. It was hidden under the seat."

Hatter couldn't get up the slant and was taking a rest halfway up. Nevada lifted a heavy stone and placed it on the edge. His sour mood engulfed him. "It's a funny thing, Newcomb, how things turn out," he muttered. "I got aboard this coach in the first place not because I got that damned notice, but because I knew Stanger would be aboard. I meant to find out from him who the big boss of your sorry outfit was, and then I was going back and have it out with him on a personal basis. I was sore. I didn't like to get badgered out of my job, and, if you get right down to it, I don't like to see anybody kicking a down dog in the teeth, no matter what color he is. I didn't know it was Dixon I was looking for. I know it now, but Stanger's taken the play right away from me. It puts me at a loose end."

"It isn't true," Newcomb insisted, stubbornly. "The Camp-town Committee for Law and Order is a—"

Stanger's shot, the thing they were waiting for, bellowed down on them and made a bickering sound as it tacked from wall to wall down the wash. Newcomb put his hand to his head and closed his eyes. Nevada looked over his shoulder, as if he might be able to see the sound. It died away to nothing before either of them spoke. Then Nevada repeated what he had said before, "It puts me at a loose end."

Nevada's loose end wasn't at all what it seemed. With only such ceremony and compassion as a man might hold in his heart, they filled the graves and built them up with stones to hold them against scavengers. Then Nevada went to get Hatter, still perched on the slant half-way to the rim. The lace edging of the bandage on his leg made a ridiculous sight, and Nevada had to laugh in spite of himself.

"No accommodations here," Hatter stated regretfully, and Nevada knew he was off again.

"We'll get to the coach and see if we can find some there," Nevada told him. "Wait a minute an' I'll see what the weather is outside." He went higher and looked over the rim, and when his head showed over the edge Dolph Dixon spoke to him.

Dixon rode Stanger's mule and carried Stanger's gun. Hasker and Crone, the two men who had backed him up at the depot in Camptown in the small fuss over Yo, were with him. Hasker had an odd cast in one eye, or a draw from an old scar in his face, that made him look sinister. Crone was fat and flabby, and sat his horse like a

sack of loose bran. Both rode brown horses. These were the men Stanger claimed Dixon had ordered to stand by at Trinity House during the raid, and apparently they had found Su Shiu's treasure in the ashes. A gunnysack with a hole in it hung from Hasker's saddle, and Nevada could see the telltale paint on the tin box Trinity had mentioned.

If he was surprised, Nevada didn't show it. "We can use a little help here," he remarked, wondering what they would do with that.

Dixon showed his teeth in a mirthless grimace. He still looked a little shaky from his encounter with Stanger. Stanger's gun stuck out of the edge of his vest like a broken rib. Hasker took it on himself to answer Nevada's remark. "So we thought," he said, and gave Crone a sly look.

All right, play it sly, Nevada thought, so long as that holds out I'll have my gun. Hasker made it look as if they were real friendly, but he managed to stay behind the others, herding them along to the stage coach. Nevada didn't ask about Stanger, and no one offered any information, but he



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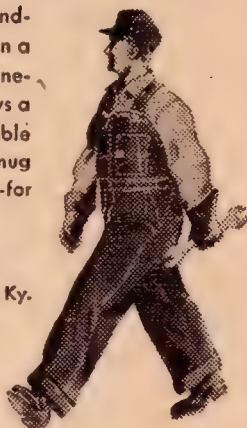
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supposed the shot they had heard had come from Hasker or Crone, bushed up somewhere along the route Stanger had taken. Very unlucky for Nevada Kell. Dixon could have only one reason for coming back.

Nevada knew about the gold cache at Trinity, and was bound to raise a howl once he got back to Camptown. *They're going to give me the works*, Nevada thought, *and that means the rest get it, too, every one of them. They'll make a massacre, and blame it on Utah Ball.*

Newcomb was pleased to see Dixon. He led Dolly out as if he expected everybody to dismount and give her a horse, but no one obliged. Nevada walked to the coach and kept it at his back. Jenny joined him, and there was deep concern showing in her eyes.

"I see you got rid of your stays," he told her. "Looks nice."

"Oh, you." She had gone through her grips and carried what she wanted in a small valise. "Just my best jewels," she said. "A handful of diamonds and a few star sapphires. That's all."

"Just a little something for your old age, eh?"

"We aren't going to have any, Nevada." Her voice rode out of control a little.

"Dammit," Nevada exploded. "You're as silly as they make 'em."

"A girl's got to face the facts. I want to stand right here by you."

"You get the hell out of here," Nevada told her. "I don't want to be cramped when the shooting starts."

This talk was whispered back and forth. "Go on, go away," he told her again. "Start walking, or something. See what happens. You might get out of reach."

"And after they get through with you, they'd chase me like a rabbit."

"That's possible. Or like a girl."

"Yes. But, according to Dolly, I'm not supposed to mind."

"Has she been handing you that, too?"

In the end, it was Newcomb who started the ball rolling. "I wonder if she could climb up with somebody," he remarked so all three riders could hear. "She's had a tough time of it, no water, no food, no nothin'. She's delicate, and—" His voice dribbled away to nothing, as if he had said enough to get an answer. But

he didn't get one, and moved back to comfort Dolly. "We'll get you fixed up somehow, honey," he told her.

Nevada had a notion he saw Hatter's gun bulging out of Newcomb's shirt, but he wasn't sure. Dolly looked sulky, and staggered a little, as if she might collapse right there, but Newcomb was pre-occupied with his shirt button and didn't try to catch her, so she had to manage all by herself.

Hasker said "Nuts," as if he were throwing something away that disgusted him. Nevada knew what it was. So did Dixon and Crone. Newcomb seemed to, too. He suddenly started moving Dolly out of there. Nevada gave Jenny a warning look, and she started away. Dixon kicked his mule to get its hind end swung, and Crone moved around sideways with his more manageable horse.

"I get the point," Nevada spoke up, mildly, "and we might as well get down to business. I go after you, Dixon. You're my meat." His hand moved toward his gun butt and stayed there, the long fingers twitching a little.

DIXON'S dead cigar slid out of his teeth. His eyes shot at Hasker, trying to call a halt to something that had caught fire too quick, but Hasker didn't look at him. Hasker was watching Newcomb who was coming back on a dead run, his honest mind made up at last. But he still had a lot of distance to cover, and before he got halfway back Hasker raised his gun and fired a shot at him, then whipped his weapon back at Nevada. He was a little late; Newcomb had done that much.

Nevada's gun roared, and Hasker's tardy lead plowed into the ground. Hasker himself followed it a second later in a head-long plunge. His horse spooked, dragging him, momentarily blocking off Dixon and Crone, giving Nevada still a little more time. He needed it. Lead crashed into the stage coach behind him and he wondered if Hatter was catching any of it. Nevada caught some himself. It brought him to his knees, but he grabbed a wheel spoke with one hand and poured lead furiously with the other.

Dixon's mule kicked and squealed, and Dixon went overboard. He landed on all fours and it took him some time to get his

bearings. Crone's horse went crazy and spoiled most of Crone's shooting. Newcomb was still on the way, and Crone tried another shot at him, but Newcomb kept coming. "Ben, come back here," Dolly screamed, but Ben didn't stop.

All at once, blood pumped down Crone's shirt sleeve. His arm went limp and he raked his horse and tried to dig out. Dixon screeched with fury and jumped up. He grabbed a bridle rein and swung the horse. Then he grabbed Crone's leg and tried to pull him off. Crone struck at him with the gun, but he hung on. Nevada got to his feet, but sagged down again. Newcomb fired another shot, but, in the end, Dixon and Crone settled it between them in a fight for the horse.

Crone began to lose his balance. Dixon was dragging him down. Crone's gun roared, and Dixon dropped. Crone grabbed for the horn, but he was too far gone to pull back. He went down and bounced away until he lost his momentum. Dixon was sprawled flat ten feet away. Crone had his back to him. He looked too dazed to move. Dixon twisted around and lifted his gun. It took both hands to do it, and his face bulged with the effort it took to pull the trigger. The gun roared, and a red rose blossomed on Crone's back between his shoulder blades. He coughed carefully, then tipped sideways and lay down, as if sleep had overtaken him.

Dixon tried to get off a second shot, but his strength was gone, seeped away in a red pool under him. He glanced over his shoulder at Nevada with a bewildered look, then his eyes rolled and his jaw sagged, and he went his way.

"Whew!" Nevada breathed, and leaned his head against the wheel of the battered stage coach.

Hatter, no worse off than he had been when the uproar started, poked his head out of the riddled coach and said, "Willie, catch me a horse. We're going to Camptown."

"Right, boss," Nevada answered, "we're sure enough goin' to Camptown."

Newcomb, with a dark smoulder of anger on his face, partly perhaps at his own poor showing, partly at the folly of his faith in Dixon, said he had a piece to speak when they got there, and what he said would shame the vigilantes out of existence.

Nevada nodded. "You're all right, Newcomb, when you see straight." He canted his head at the shovel. "You'll have to do some more digging. Make it shallow. Then climb Hasker's horse and see if you can catch Crone's animal. Balls of fire, my poor leg!"

Jenny bandaged it with more petticoat. "Got any lace edging left?" he asked. "I like the effect on Hatter."

"Oh, keep quiet," she told him, her hands fluttering because it was Nevada she was working on.

"You know," Nevada said after a thoughtful pause, "all this uproar throws me clear out of a job. The vigilantes are bust when Newcomb speaks his piece, so Su Shiu and his friends won't need me anymore. I hope you've got enough diamonds and sapphires packed away for both of us."

"I have."

"Still, it puts me at a loose end."

She made a scoffing sound. "Dixons come as fast as they go, Nevada. Su Shiu knows that better than you and I. You'll be running gold dust till you're blue in the face."

"Sure, I know," Nevada agreed with a grin. "I just like to hear you talk. It keeps my mind off my leg."

Newcomb came back with Crone's spooked horse in tow, and Nevada shed another very mild worry. "Dolly gets a ride after all," he said.

They all did. Hatter got the mule. Jenny and Nevada doubled up on Hasker's horse, Jenny in the saddle, Nevada behind her. Newcomb and his bride got Crone's horse. Dolly insisted on riding side-saddle like a lady, and didn't leave much more than the tail for Newcomb to sit on.

"He ought to bop her," Nevada muttered.

"Would you, if you had the right?" Jenny asked.

"I sure would."

"Me, for instance?"

"Yeah, you."

Jenny laughed, a half-jeering, half-joyous sound. "We'll see," she said, and pulled his arms around her.

Nevada rested his head on her shoulder. "Now all we've got to worry about is old Utah Ball!" he announced, closing his eyes. ● ● ●

By CY KEEES

Any puncher that stood up to Wild Sam Tammer had already gone halfway to boothill—unless Wild Sam's daughter would travel the rest of the trail with him!



"Drag that pot—and your gun!" Wild Sam roared hoarsely.

THE TAMING OF WILD SAM

THE lid was off in the Bison Saloon when the old drifter sidled through the batwings. I was bartending alone, and the bar was squeezed full of thirsty cowhands. The piano music almost drowned out the click of pool balls from the back.

Above the hubbub of punchers celebrating payday, I could hear the rumbling below of Garth Gaston. He was telling a

percentage girl what a tough hombre he was—an all-evening's job. Garth Gaston only talked two ways. He either said something against somebody or for himself.

The old drifter walked forward hesitantly, his tattered black coat hanging almost to his knees. He had kind of a sick look on his whiskery, haggard face like he'd seen too many of the same kind of barrooms. His hat might have come off a scarecrow, it was so full of holes, and he set his scuffed boots down easy like the soles might be thin.

He looked like a common range tramp except for just one thing. His eyes. They were steel-blue, cold as ice and there was a hellish hurt in them buried deep.

He shuffled up near the bar, and the waddies were soon including him in the rounds. From down the bar, Garth Gaston spied him and swaggered up alongside. An ugly grin on his face, he bought the drifter a drink. Things quieted down along the bar because everyone knew Gaston had something mean in his head or he wouldn't have done it.

The old drifter mumbled his thanks and frowned like he hated the taste.

Then Gaston sneered and asked him how he planned on paying back for the drink. He bared his yellow teeth some more and suggested a dance. The drifter shrank a little farther into his long coat and asked kind of humble-like if he could tell a story instead.

The grin left Gaston's face. He pulled a big, bonehandled .45 from his holster and laid it ready on the bar. "Tell it, mister," he said with his rough rasp. "Tell it fast and tell it scarey. If I don't like it, you're goin' to dance gratis. A regular, high-hoppin', sky-kickin' prance!"

Everybody was a little sick and still when he started. We all knew no matter what the old drifter would tell, Gaston would claim he didn't like it . . . and grab that sixgun off the bar.

IT WAS in western Montana near the Idaho panhandle that Wild Sam Tammer had his layout. He got that outfit in the only way he knew how—with a long-rope in one hand and a ready gun in the other.

The law? He carried *that* in his holsters. Two Peacemakers he had, slung low, and

anybody who challenged him didn't live long enough to regret it. He didn't quit with wounding a man—he walked right up to him and emptied his gun. Claimed it kept the crowd thinned on his backtrail.

How that old hellion ever had the daughter he did, nobody could figure out. Barbara Tammer was as gentle as the old man was tough. She had a low, husky voice to go with her taffy hair, and her dark eyes made those tough Bar T punchers shave of a morning just hoping she'd notice.

Barbara was as shy as a fawn, but going on eighteen, and Wild Sam saw she was starting to pick favorites out of that crew of hairpin punchers. And if there was one thing Sam wanted to hold onto, it was his girl. She was the only person that made fighting for his holdings worthwhile. So he hitched on to an idea to keep her and still appear to be giving her a fair chance for a nest of her own.

"Any one wants to marry my girl's got to prove he's man enough," he barked one night to his crew. "Here's my deal—take it or leave it! Any man that wants to try'll work my hours at the jobs I give. If you can take it for one year, I'll turn over my Tumblin' T ranch, and you can ask the girl. It'll be up to her, but either way you'll keep the ranch. Give up before the year's over, and you go back to your old job without pay for the time you tried." He glared around the room staring down each puncher in turn. "And any man tries any shortcuts gets his damned guts blowed out!"

The Tumbling T was Wild Sam's first ranch and a sweet spread with lots of water that the home ranch—the Bar T—depended on in summer. It sounded like an easy gamble, and half the crew jumped up before the old man finished. But most of them weren't thinking of the ranch. They had a dark-eyed, taffy-haired gal in their heads.

Nobody thought of getting it down in writing. Ornery as he was, Wild Sam's word was always gold, and they knew it. And better because Sam told them that the winner wouldn't ever be bothered by the home Bar T. That meant a lot more to those eager waddies than any law papers could. They argued and cussed for an hour to see who'd get first whack at it.

They finally cut their greasy deck of poker cards, and an ugly, warped puncher

by the name of Bill Leddy won first try. He lasted two weeks and was never the same afterwards. Some lasted longer, some less, until the last one, a sorry flunky by the name of Spud.

He surprised them at first, pitching right in and staying with it. But Wild Sam had a cure for that. He started piling it on, giving more work for a day than a man ought to do in two. They found Spud keeled over a post maul. He'd been trying to build a drift fence in a hot, rocky canyon where Bar T cows never went anyhow.

That was all for the Bar T boys, but the word got around and soon young cowpokes were drifting in from all parts of the country to take Wild Sam up. He got a lot of free work and kept Barbara at the same time. She was getting quieter, and some of the sparkle was going out of her dark eyes, but she didn't say anything. She was loyal to the bone.

Seemed like as if she almost knew Johnny Prescott was coming although they'd never seen each other then.

She was trying to feed a mammyless calf out of a bucket when Johnny rode into the Bar T ranchyard. He swung off his horse and took the bucket from her without a word. He poked two of his fingers in the calf's mouth and eased its head down in the bucket.

He looked up at her with a friendly grin, and she knew why he'd come. Barbara was a little scared of him at first, but she stayed right there.

The calf sucked the bucket dry between his fingers. And all the time the two looked at each other. Before he handed the bucket back to her, they both knew that somehow Johnny had to beat Wild Sam's game.

SAM guessed as soon as he saw Prescott that he was going to be hard to down. He'd come all the way from Texas to win that Montana beauty, and the look in his hard gray eyes said he'd go right through hell and back for the same chance. And Barbara Tammer watched with a strange glow in her dark eyes.

Sam figured out his schedule and grinned to himself.

He kept Johnny on the go eighteen hours a day and tried to find ways to keep him from getting rest the other six. If there was a mean, miserable job that needed do-

ing, Johnny got it and a set time to get it done. Sam lay awake nights thinking up new chores that'd break a man's spirit as well as his back.

He'd think of some hellhole of a canyon where not a breeze stirred, and he'd have Prescott out there near dawn building a fence. Sam was spying on him most of the time and let him know it. Johnny didn't dare quit till it was too dark to see the holes he was trying to crowbar out through bedrock.

Johnny gaunted down, and his eyes got a dull, faraway glaze like he was dreaming of days and days of resting in the shade. But he stayed right with it.

And every time he came in at night, Barbara was waiting for him and would walk with him as far as the bunkhouse door. It got so that it was all that kept Prescott going. The hope gleaming in her eyes and her shy, encouraging smile.

So Wild Sam poured it on. He rode right along hazing Johnny and threatening to call the deal off when Johnny stopped to catch his wind. But Johnny was long on shoulders and had thick, hairy wrists that were gluttons for the work Wild Sam threw at him.

But he had more than that. He had a dark-eyed gal waiting and hoping every day that he'd make it. A gal he couldn't have faced if he'd quit.

Eight months of his year passed, and Wild Sam was secretly getting desperate. And when Sam got desperate, you had to watch him close. After an extra backbusting day, he ordered Johnny to follow him into town as soon as he'd eaten to get his orders for the next morning.

It was a useless eleven-mile trip: every puncher on the ranch knew it was just another of Wild Sam's tricks to run him into the ground. They liked Johnny and were pulling for him, but there was nothing they could do to help.

Johnny Prescott looked like a ghost coming into the Steerhead Saloon that night. His stare was froze, his cheekbones stuck out, and he walked with slow, dragging steps. He was about through, and everybody knew it. He didn't have a chance to win against Wild Sam's cold deck.

Sam saw him come in and knew it too. With his mean streak, he just couldn't help rubbing it in.

"Kind of tuckered, tonight, eh?" he sneered. "Almost thought you was man enough. But I was wrong. Rabbit guts always show-up in the end."

Johnny Prescott went whiter still, but he didn't say anything. Just stood there weaving, waiting for his orders. Wild Sam laughed.

"Sit down and play a couple of hands," he said, baiting him some more.

Prescott shook his head and almost toppled over. He was dozing right on his feet.

Wild Sam got up, grinning. He grabbed Prescott by the shirt front and threw him in a chair.

"You take orders from me," he said, and his voice was nasty. "If I say play, by damn, *you'll play!*"

And Prescott played. Played and lost. He shoved chips in the pot like he was dead drunk and didn't know what they meant. Wild Sam dragged the pots and kept rubbing it in how Prescott had rabbit guts. It seemed all the time that Johnny was too far gone to know what was going on. But his gray eyes were glinting kind of real peculiar.

They were down to the last card draw in a game of stud when everybody watching found out what that glint meant. Sam was dealing and had tens paired and an ace on top. Johnny Prescott had a king, five and a trey.

"Check the bet on the last card," Johnny said, looking up through slitted eyes. "Fresh out of money."

Wild Sam cackled and looked at his hole card. "Too bad that you're so damn pore," he said. "What you really mean is, you got too much rabbit guts to bet."

"You want to bet that hard, eh?" Johnny asked, kind of sucking him in.

"Right to the finish," Wild Sam gloated. "If you just had the guts, I'd—"

Johnny pushed himself to his feet and glared at Sam across the table. "You talk a lot about guts," he snapped. Let's see how long you are on 'em. I got eight months work behind me. I worked them for the sweetest girl ever stuck with an old he-boar like you. I'll bet that eight months work. I'll bet it *and* an extra year without a dime pay . . . against the rest of my time. I'll bet it on the next card!"

Everything was hushed in the saloon then. Everybody knew what Prescott was

doing. He was trying to whipsaw Wild Sam Tammer into a hole where the fight they'd been carrying on would be decided one way or the other. And he was throwing in plenty to sweeten the pot.

He was throwing in eight months of sweat, misery and fighting against hellish odds. And an extra year of working free under a boss that'd be rubbing it in all the time. A year of useless working and looking at the gal he never could have.

And all he had to back it was a hole card that had to be a king, or he was beat on the board by the pair of tens.

It was all up to Wild Sam Tammer. He was sweating a little himself now, knowing he'd shot off his face at the wrong time. He couldn't back out without a good excuse, or he'd be snickered at something fierce for not backing his palaver. And there just wasn't any excuse with the odds he was being offered.

Sam glanced at his hole card, stalling for time. The king of clubs was there, backing his ace and tens. He'd already spotted the king of diamonds cut off on the bottom of the deck. That meant that there was only one king unaccounted for after figuring the one that lay partly over Prescott's hole card. Unless Prescott had the only other king in the hole, he was beat on the board.

FROM across the table, Prescott shrugged his tired shoulders. "If you're going to back water," he said insultingly, "there's nothin'—"

"Set right back down there," Wild Sam roared. "It's a deal! You'll wish for a long time you'd stayed in Texas. You're going to find out how damn long a year can be!"

Prescott was breathing heavy, his gray eyes glued on the deck. Sam took his time, hoping to make him squirm. Real slow, he flipped the top card to Prescott, a five of hearts pairing him. Then he peeled off an ace for himself. Two pairs, aces and tens.

Wild Sam settled back in his chair with relief. He kind of wished Prescott had drawn the king so his two pairs on the last card would've made it hurt all the more.

He flipped his king out of the hole and looked up, intending to rub it in. He kind of choked back his words when he looked into Johnny Prescott's big grin. Slow and

deliberate, Prescott was folding over his hole card—a five of spades: *three* in all.

Everybody stared at the wild chance Prescott had taken. He'd thrown everything on the turn of that one card, hoping either to catch another pair or a third five. With Wild Sam pairing, the five was the only card he could've won on.

Sam looked at those three cards for a long time, not quite believing it. Then he went locoed. He kicked the table aside like a mad bull. His hands itched towards the low-slung Peacemakers.

"You called that deal," he said, and his voice was so hoarse with mad he almost choked. "I'm callin' this one. Drag that pot—and your gun, or I'll shoot your guts out!"

The bystanders scuttled to the sides and held their breaths. It was a terrible sight when Wild Sam really went on the prod. He didn't know nothing during those times except to gun whatever was in his way. And his hands were on the butts of his Peacemakers, ready to flip and throw lead as soon as Prescott took up the challenge.

But Johnny Prescott didn't take it up. He grinned kind of frosty-like and looked the old man square in the eye without moving a finger towards his gun. And it wasn't because he was scared of the old hellion.

He knew he couldn't go back and touch Barbara with the blood of her old man tainting his hands. Wild Sam guessed it. He cursed Prescott, using every cuss-word ever and made up some new ones as he went. He tried every which way to stampede him into drawing.

Getting whiter and whiter, Johnny Prescott stood there staring back, never blinking an eye. That was probably the worst cussing any Texan ever took without giving ground or fighting.

But the game Johnny was after meant a lot more to him than his pride. He took and took until Wild Sam Tammer sapped himself and had to quit. And right then, Sam knew he was whipped.

Johnny and Barbara were married, and Sam wasn't around to give the bride away. He was out at the Bar T ranch in the kitchen trying his damndest to empty a gallon of whiskey. He didn't know then that the worst was yet to come.

Like I told you, the Tumbling T had springs that the home Bar T needed bad in

the summer. Well the first thing Johnny Prescott did after he took his bride home was to go out and fence those springs in. Wild Sam went over, white hot, ready to stampede.

Seems that Johnny knew some little ranchers that had been longroped out of their spreads by Wild Sam. Johnny said to square up or no water.

That burned Sam to the bone, but he couldn't do anything about it. There was no way he could use force because he'd promised to let the winner of the Tumbling T live peaceably and his word was still gold. Course, when he'd said that, he hadn't figured anybody to be man enough to win it.

But Wild Sam didn't give up that easy. He still had a trump card that he kind of hated to use. But there was no other way out. He figured with help in the enemy camp, he'd win in the end. He caught Barbara alone and asked her to go to work to beat Johnny's head down.

Well, little Barbara up and told him to play his cards someplace else. She had switched her loyalty when she married Johnny and was all for defending her home. She had a new boss making the rules—a boss she loved more than she could have loved her old man.

So Wild Sam's trump card turned out to be a joker.

Then the drought hit Montana and water got scarce. Wild Sam got water for his cattle from Prescott. And he paid through the nose for it. But it didn't matter much to Sam anymore. Barbara had switched sides, and his ambition was gone. He didn't have anybody to work for. And that meant he didn't have anything!

One day he up and settled accounts with the ranchers he'd beat out. It broke him and he had to sell the home Bar T to settle his debts.

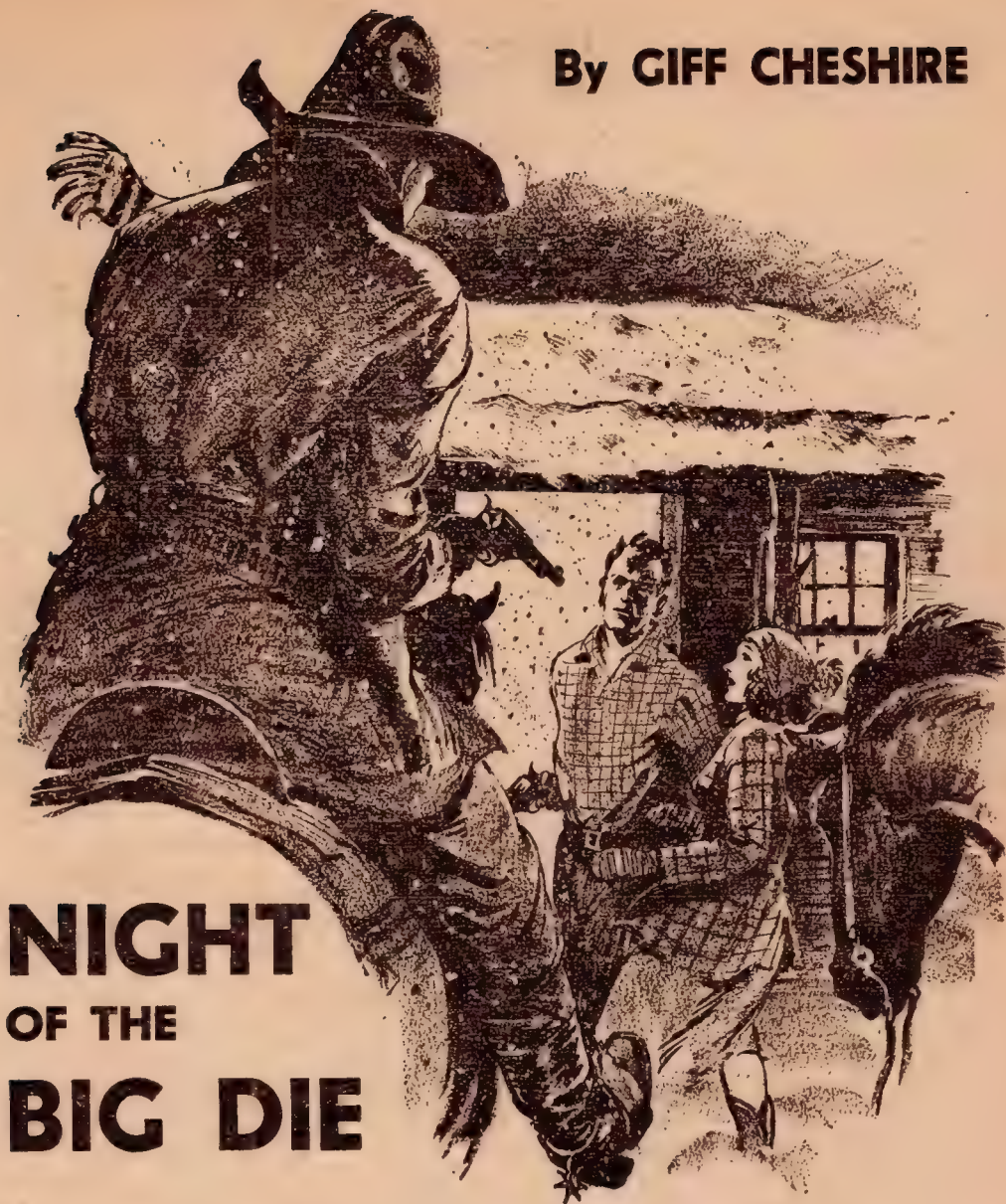
Johnny and Barbara felt real bad then and tried to get him to come and live on the Tumbling T. But Wild Sam had too stiff a neck to come crawling on his belly thataway.

He forked the only horse he had left and hit the backtrails.

Heard tell that Johnny and Barbara have a son now. He'll never see his grandpappy or know what a heller he was be-

(Continued on page 110)

By GIFF CHESHIRE



NIGHT OF THE BIG DIE

"Shove up your hands, bucko! Or one of you gets it!"

WHEN the wind took to bellowing like starved cattle, a man was in deep water. Abe Quilter sat up and swung his bare feet to the cold floor. Hardly enough light to suggest day seeped through the ice-scaled window. He shoved a hand against the pillow, pushing up. Anxiety filled him again. Even fully awake he kept hearing steers in the wind's howl, steers mad with hunger. Blizzard or not,

When Abe Quilter was ready, he'd order himself a C.O.D. bride. Meanwhile, he had a herd to keep alive through the big freeze, and he didn't take kindly to half-frozen girls who arrived uninvited!

that wasn't possible. He didn't have an animal on the place that wasn't fat, and the storm had been just two days. What he heard was only his own worry over what might happen. That had become too real to him, scrambling his brains.

He dressed hurriedly, angry with himself. This would be another housebound day, though he hoped it would clear up enough that he could sled more hay to the cattle. Pulling on his boots, he paused and sat motionless, listening again with hard attention. Worry etched his forehead and tightened his weathered face; a lean face that was built around a sharp, bulging jaw. His brown eyes, usually warm and amiable, were suddenly hard. His big hands, tightened on his boot tops, were white-knuckled, trembling a little.

He made a brisk, thumping walk into the kitchen. The window there, giving on his distant stackyard, was also opaque with ice. He nearly went out to the porch, then refused to give in to his jittery imagination. He had a hill ranch, no neighbors within ten miles, no stray stock to contend with.

He went to the stove and briskly rattled the lids, liking the familiar sound of them. He'd brought a pail of water indoors, last night. It had ice on it, which he broke. He filled the coffee pot, poured water into the tin basin and washed. Usually, of a morning, the first thing he did was to take inventory in his mind. He did that now to put down his worries.

He had a fine cabin of chinked logs—no mere bachelor's nest but a sitting room, kitchen and bedroom. And he'd think about the woman. He didn't know her yet but he was going to order her, come another summer, if he made out well until then. What they called a Monky Ward wife. A year ago he'd clipped an advertisement of some people who made match-making their business. He'd written a dozen different letters, never mailing a one. He wasn't ready yet. When he sent for a wife he'd be in shape to care for her or he wouldn't send.

Now he could think of neither home nor wife because his ranch yelled at him again in the wind. What he'd heard this time was a truly ominous bellow coming downwind from the stackyard.

Abe snatched his sheepskin off the peg, got into it and grabbed his hat. Crossing the porch, he realized that he should have

come out when he first had the impulse. The sound was louder out here, and it actually was that of bawling cattle. The stackyard was two hundred yards off, beyond the barn. He couldn't have seen anything, anyhow, for he could barely make out the barn. The snow drove on a slant and was piled two feet deep in the yard.

He didn't bother to get a horse. Floundering and pawing, he went wallowing through the snow. The barn door had been banked tight-shut, so he went around the building, which required him to climb two corral fences. At the barn's back corner he came upon a sight that appalled him. Cattle were in the stackyards, all around his two hay stacks, going it like young pigs at sows.

But they weren't his! He didn't recognize the few brands he could read at all: a dot in a diamond.

ABE let out a howl as he belted forward. They not only were tearing his stacks apart; they were scattering priceless hay over the tramped surrounding snow. He yelled at the intruders. He made snowballs, hurled them, and he cursed the Diamond Dots blue. His head was so full of new concerns that he was half crazy. Mainly he remembered the hot summer days when he'd built those stacks, mowing the wild hay by hand. He also thought of his own fat steers. He'd refused to sell any of them so he could build his herd faster and be a going concern when he sent off for a wife. His own stock was on ration, but these horned hogs had never even heard of the word. They'd have him ruined by nightfall.

Abe realized there was no driving them away. They didn't look poorly but they'd drifted a long way and were hungry as wolves. Their Diamond Dot brand still was a mystery to Abe; he'd never heard of it. Yet he had to separate them from that hay or his own stock was in danger. He wished he'd brought his rifle. He'd have to shoot them. That was all there was to it.

He couldn't see but suspected that they'd managed to knock down his rail fence. The hungry bawling he'd heard had been when they were trying to get through, smelling the hay and kept from it by the fence, their insides grinding with hunger. Abe was not an inhumane man. He simply lacked the fodder to take care of forty-fifty strays.

He turned around and saw that the back

door of the barn had been blown open. He decided to go through, that being easier. The howling wind came around to his back, strong enough to push him forward. He stumbled against the back wall of the barn then sidled along to the door. There was a sudden hollow, lifeless feeling when he stepped into shelter.

He was moving through the barn's center toward the front door when he saw the burlap-wrapped feet sticking out of the hay-pile. Abe let out a howl. A man was buried in the hay, asleep, though Abe could see nothing but the heavily wrapped feet. Those steers weren't strays; this jigger had turned them into the stackyard! Abe bounded forward and began to kick the hay around the obscured figure, yelling his head off.

A scream curdled his blood. It wasn't a man's—it was the shriek of a cougar. And what came out of the hay was a cougar, too. It came at Abe, and it wore a dress.

Abe held her off with a hand shoved into her face. She wasn't big but she was mad and dangerous. She'd lost her stocking cap, and black hair whipped about her furious cheeks.

He bawled, "I don't know where you come from and I don't care! But you show the gall of a seagull using a man's hay without his leave!"

"Let your hackles down!" Her lips tickled his palm, her breath was warm against it. She got his wrist and wrenched his arm away like it was only a willow sprout tickling her. Then she hunched her shoulders and glared at him. "I was lucky I made it to the barn, even; I was that close to finished! But I'm thawed out. And if you think you can get gay with me, mister, just you hop to it!"

"My hay!" Abe bawled. "I can't spare a straw of it!"

"I'll pay for it! I got a little money!"

"Think my steers can eat money?" Abe yelled.

"All right," the girl said, calming down all at once. "Drive my steers outa there, then. Go ahead. Who's holding you?"

Abe was not by nature a selfish man. But town was thirty miles off, at the end of a mountain road now two to ten feet deep in snow. Abe raised his own feed, but if a man hauled bought hay he did it before bad weather. Still, the girl had a bargaining point, he admitted. A man couldn't

even rope and drag those Diamond Dots away from the stacks in this underfooting. That was the point she had decided to stand on.

"Where'd you come from, anyhow?" he asked, more moderately.

"Trinket Creek."

"Where's that?"

"I hope its on the far side of the Greens."

Abe stared at her. "You mean you come across the mountains? In this? Drivin' steers? Trying to get away from Trinket Creek?"

"I didn't come by stage," she said. "I didn't ship the steers. And if I'd liked Trinket Creek I'd have stayed there."

"Who in tunket are you, girl?" Abe asked, awed.

"Name of Jenny Lee. Who in tunket are you?"

"Abe Quilter. At your service, since I can't help it. You eat regular?"

"Did," said Jenny Lee. "Up till I quit eating. That was day before yesterday."

She had him, even if she had as good as ruined him before he'd even laid eyes on her. But, after all, she'd meant to pay for the hay, not realizing it could not be replaced. In a resigned voice Abe said, "Come on to the cabin and get the wrinkles outa your belly. Then I'll see what I can do toward saving the hay they're only tramping. If you'd had a lick of sense, girl, you'd of left them outside the fence. Then hay could have been hauled to them, spare and proper."

"That's where I left 'em," Jenny Lee told him. "It's about all I remember, that and making for the barn. Then I guess I caved in. If they got in, they broke in."

She was still dead-beat, but she disdained Abe's help and staggered through the snow on her own. Abe didn't force himself on her. Any girl who could cross the Greens with a cut of steers in a blizzard could cross his yard unassisted. She seemed to want him to understand that. But he made her stop on the porch and pinched her ears. She could feel it; her hair and the stocking cap had protected them from freezing. Her hands looked red but apparently she had thawed herself out before she'd passed out in the hay. Force of habit, instinct. She'd had good training.

"We better get your feet out of them sacks and your boots off," he said.

"My feet're all right," Jenny retorted. "I had a horse up to a while before I had to quit. He went. When I got here I knew it was as far as I'd make it, too. Lordy, mister, you ought to stake your place down. It's spinning—"

Abe caught her. Her eyes rolled upward and she'd gone limp. She was light, awfully light, when he swung her up into his arms. Warm, too, and for all the harm she'd done him he was glad she got here before she let go. He carried her into the kitchen, then on into the bedroom. He put her down on the bed he had himself so recently vacated.

He knew he'd ought to shuck her off clean and put her to bed but he was hesitant. Yet her clothing was half frozen. He got her coat off, then boots, then he went ahead and did the job proper. She was tucked in up to her ears when he tiptoed out into the kitchen. The Diamond Dots had satisfied themselves and were storing hay away in case hard times came upon them again. Abe wondered what had started Jenny out with them in the blizzard.

Abe cooked breakfast for two though he doubted that she'd wake up before supper. He was right. The hours wore away and every time he peeked in through the curtain she was still, save for the covers that lifted and fell with her breathing. Jenny Lee was catching up on sleep right now, and her eating could keep until later.

Abe remembered that she had said she had money to pay for the hay, and he considered his chances of getting through to town. In addition to three saddle horses, he had a team of mountain mules, tough, long-legged critters, as stubborn as himself and Jenny Lee. He had a sleigh, it being the only vehicle worth a hoot in the hills during the winter. A man could rope a lot of baled hay on a sleigh, if he could get the thing over the road.

That was the rub. A mountain spur as bad as the Greens lay between here and town. A man couldn't make it.

HE WENT out in mid-afternoon, hoping the Diamond Dots would be fed up enough to be tractable. They were. He hazed them out, through the break they'd made by pushing the rail fence over, and he fixed the fence. The Diamond Dots needed water, which wasn't to be had where he'd put them. He argued with himself for sev-

eral minutes then gave in. He drove them on and turned them in with his own stuff, where there was a creek too swift to freeze. Jenny Lee had sure moved in with him.

Jenny was up and dressed when he got back to the cabin. She stared at him through narrowed eyes and said, "Who undressed me?"

"I did." Noting the gathering storm in her eyes, he added, "Now, look here. If you think I see anything worth looking at in a skinned rabbit, you're crazy."

"Skinned rabbit?" Her mouth opened and stayed that way.

"When I've fed you up," Abe added, "it might be a different story. If you'll be so kind as to stay out of my way, I'll get at it."

She flounced into the sitting room. He'd acknowledged the occasion by lighting a blaze in the rock fireplace in there. When he went in to tell Jenny that supper was ready, she'd fallen asleep in a highback barrel chair. She looked pretty as a kitten, limp and kind of curled up. Small, awfully small. Abe thought about the mountains she had crossed and he shuddered.

"Got your steers out of the stackyard," he told her at supper. "Had to turn 'em in with mine so they could water."

"When you going to get more hay?" Jenny asked.

"There's no hauling any more hay." Abe's voice turned gruff.

"There is if a man had a mind to do it." Jenny smiled at him archly. "But, of course, you haven't the mind to. Soft is as soft does, they say."

Abe came forward on his elbows. "You could haul it, I reckon!"

"Certainly," said Jenny. "But I've bought what hay I'll need during my short visit here. You're the one who's running out of it. You'll let your steers starve, likely. Too scared to go after more hay."

She was getting back at him for the skinned rabbit business, Abe realized. But she was also impugning his manhood. She'd come across the mountains in the blizzard and it had given her a high opinion of herself. Abe's blood began to boil.

"Pay me for the hay!" he thundered. "And we'll see if I'm too scared!"

"When the weather's better, naturally," she said. "Or with some other cautious reservation. This might not blow over for

weeks, Abe. Pap said it would be a hard winter."

"Who's your pap?"

"His name was Lee, too." That was all she was going to tell him. She grimaced and went on eating.

But she'd spoken of her father in the past tense, which meant he was gone. That might have had something to do with her hitting the blizzard trail. When she'd filled up Jenny went into the bedroom. She returned soon and dropped a wad of greenbacks on the table. "I'll pay for all the hay you can bring," she said. "Whatever it costs you." Her eyes taunted him, daring him to prove he could bring it. He didn't know what to think. Maybe she regretted having threatened his wintering herd and was trying to get him to save the situation. Or maybe she was just roweling him.

Abe slept on the bearskin rug in front of the fireplace. He was up before daylight to hear the same old howling wind on the eaves and building corners. He thought of the long trail to town and for a moment was down with a case of jitters. Then he went to the kitchen, started a fire and cooked his breakfast. Jenny Lee seemed to have succumbed to somnolence again. He left the house without seeing her.

He hitched the mules to the sleigh. He had trouble with them; they didn't want to leave a nice warm barn. He got rope, an axe and shovel and put them in the sleigh. He got some extra horse blankets and a lantern. He had Jenny's money in his pocket and butterflies in his stomach. It was still snowing, though not so heavy, and the wind was high. But Jenny—or her pap—could be right about the coming winter. The winter might only get worse instead of better. If he could get through with one load of hay, it might save him. It might even carry the Diamond Dots a while, too, for Jenny might have to leave them when she herself went on to wherever she'd been heading.

Abe drove out through the breaking dawn, not looking at the cabin, as he pulled away through the mealy gray curtain of daylight and snow. One thing about it, he knew the road to town. He was tough and stubborn and so were the mules. They didn't like the storm. They'd be anxious to get back to the barn, and that might work to his advantage. . . .

ABE made it to town, though it was late in the night when he got there. Except for the livery barn, Castle Creek was locked up tight. Abe slept in the hay and was waiting at the door when the feed man came to open his store.

"Hay?" the man said. "I got it to burn. Brung in six carloads and it's spoiling on me. This weather, nobody can haul it."

Abe piled the baled hay high on the sleigh and roped it down. He paid the feed man and was whistling when he went to get his breakfast. He was whistling again when he came out of the restaurant. It had taken a lot of tree-chopping and snow-shoveling, but he'd broken trail coming out. That would offset the load he'd have going back. Come another night, and he might show Jenny Lee just who was the best storm buckner.

It was a long day. The first miles ran through a valley and went fast. The first hills weren't bad, just teasers to what was to come. But the mules had footing in the snow they'd packed themselves and the sleigh ran easily. Abe could still whistle, though not as often.

In mid-afternoon he was pulling up to the hump and was a scared man now. He'd cut trees on the way out, but more had fallen. At the higher level, the snowfall was heavier; it had put a soft carpet on the packed snow underneath. Sometimes the mules pulled their legs right out from under, then it was a job getting them up. But he did get them up and he kept them going. Then, just before nightfall and him still ten miles from home, the sleigh and its load went over.

A runner had hit a buried rock in the road, probably. They'd been running downhill, Abe breathing easier with the hump behind him. Then all at once the sleigh reared on one runner and the top-heavy load carried it on over. But it didn't roll. Brush on the downhill side of the cut-road prevented that. But Abe went sailing.

He picked himself out of the snow and turned the air blue. Then he settled down and drove his aching body on. He had to cut the ropes and let the load spill. Then he righted the sleigh and got the harness untangled. Thereafter he had to lug each scattered bale of hay up the steep bank and pile it on the load. He'd lighted his lan-

tern before he was finished and he'd got the load roped down again. He hung the lantern on the end of the tongue and drove on . . .

He was dead beat when he pulled down into the little valley that was his own. He was too tired to feel relief or triumph, though he was back with every bale of hay he'd started with from Castle Creek.

But it puzzled him that there was no light in the cabin. It was late, but a man would think that Jenny Lee'd wait up to see if he got home all right.

The barn doors were big and he was able to run the sleigh in loaded and forget it for the time being. He took good care of the faithful mules, rubbing them down and pitching them a generous portion of the hay they'd hauled to save his herd. Then he staggered toward the house aware that he had little feeling in his face or hands or feet. He stopped on the porch, thinking how nice it would be if a man had a wife who'd welcome him home and rub the heat back into his tissues, then give him a kiss and a hot meal. That wasn't in Jenny Lee, but he knew where he could send to get a woman who had it.

He stamped and made racket, but even that didn't rouse Jenny. Finally, still rubbing his hands, he went into the kitchen. After the outdoors the place seemed warm, but there wasn't a fire. Abe groped and found a match, then swiped it across the stove to light it. There were empty pots on the stove, dirty dishes on the table, but no food waiting for him. He found the lamp and lighted it. Then he saw the paper on the table, weighted by a coffee cup.

Abe gulped as he read the note. It said: *Thanks for the steers, amigo. They'll fetch a hundred apiece in the mining camps.*

That was all, that unsigned bit of ruinous treachery. Abe hit the table a thump that all but put out the lamp. He walked half a dozen cutting circles around the kitchen. He didn't have to go out and see. He'd fallen for the oldest bait on earth, a pretty woman's apparent need of him. He'd been cleaned out by cattle thieves marketing in the gold camps south of there.

Jenny Lee wasn't the whole works, because there were three dirty plates on the table. There were three coffee cups, and brown-paper cigarettes had been doused in two of them. Jenny had come in and dev-

iled him into going to town the way he did, then her two men partners had come in and run off the steers. The Diamond Dots must have been stolen earlier. Jennie Lee had driven them across the Greens in a blizzard, had she? Abe laughed bitterly.

Then Abe halted, his mouth open. Where had they gone? There was only one road and he'd come in over that, meeting no cattle, no riders. Well, he had to eat. He couldn't do anything before daylight, if even then, with the snow wiping out the tracks. He built a fire, then pulled off his coat. His hands stung and ached like fury but he made a meal.

He was trying to eat it when he grew aware that horses had come quietly into his yard, the approach muffled by the snow then betrayed when one nickered at something, maybe the mules in the comfortable barn. Abe flung a look at his gunbelt, pegged by the door, then shoved up and made a bolt toward it. He snatched the gun from the hanging holster, and stepped out to the porch.

Jenny Lee had dismounted and was just coming onto the porch. Two benighted, male figures sat their saddles farther out. She tried to whisper something he didn't catch, then one of the men sang out.

"Shove up your hands, bucko! Or one of you gets it!"

That combination of words tended to put Jenny in a better light. Abe still held his gun, but she was between him and the two men. He let the gun drop to the porch and lifted his hands. Then he saw through it. Jenny had figured that the cattle thieving was her own little caper, and these two had horned in on it. That put her temporarily on Abe's side, but that was all it did for her.

"Pick up his gun, Jenny," the talkative man added, "and toss it out in the snow."

JENNY hesitated, making Abe remember the wildcat he'd fought in the barn. That scared him. If she showed fight now, somebody would die and wouldn't be on a horse when he did it. Then she picked up the gun by the barrel and tossed it off the porch, and Abe could breathe again. Thereupon the two riders swung down and scuffed forward.

One was big, but Abe stood him bigger. The other was slatlike, though both were

bundled up so that it was hard to judge. "Howcome?" Abe drawled. "Minin' camps closed down or something?"

"Couldn't get through," the big man said. "So we come back. What's the difference? What this Jenny-girl says, you'll likely have trailed us, anyhow, so we'd have to plug you. Might as well do it here where it's comfortable."

"You talk too much, Red," the slat-man grunted.

"Too bad I ain't a spink like you," the other retorted.

Abe and Jenny were forced to precede the pair into the kitchen. When Red was certain all was secure, he sent Spink back to put up the horses. Red was bearded and bald but his displaced hair looked like it was afire. He shucked off his coat, displaying a pair of shoulders that all but split his dirty shirt. Jenny kept trying to tell Abe something with her eyes, but he wouldn't look at her.

Then all at once she burst out: "Abe Quilter, I won't have you thinking what you're thinking! Why'd you suppose I drove across the Greens, with all I owned, if not to get away from this skunk?"

"He chasing you?" Abe inquired.

"Didn't think he would," Jenny admitted. "But he did."

"He came out in the blizzard just to latch onto forty-fifty Diamond Dot steers?" Abe jeered.

"It's Jenny Lee I want, man," Red cut in. "Me and that talkative pardner of mine, that is. We need a woman. It gets lonesome in our business. Jennie Lee's just the ticket."

Abe swallowed. There wasn't any more romance in Red than what it took to make off with Jenny and turn her into a squaw.

Even as he spoke, Red's eyes raked over her slender body; he all but drooled. Her steers—and Abe's—had been a bonus. It was Jenny's favors he meant to take.

"My pap died!" Jenny said desperately. "I tried to hold on. No neighbors, no nothing. Then these two showed up. I knew I was done for, and I lit out. You know the rest of it, Abe."

"By damn," Abe said to Red, "I'm going to cut off your ears!"

"Not right easy," Red warned him.

It didn't seem to Abe that he was going to get a chance very soon. Spink came back, the two intruders made themselves comfortable, but one or the other watched Abe and Jenny continually. Abe was dead tired but too keyed-up to sleep, even if they'd suggested it. They had repaired to the larger sitting room, and Spink had kindled a fire in the fireplace. Abe kept thinking about the gun Jenny had tossed out in the snow. He remembered where it had landed. If he could only get out there before fresh fall buried it completely!

Presently Jenny said, "Red, can I go to bed or do I have to sleep right here in front of you?"

"If you sleep," Red said, "you'll sleep right here."

"Then good night all," Jenny said. She tucked her feet under her and, sure enough, she seemed to fall asleep at once.

Maybe it was the power of suggestion, but pretty soon Spink began to nod. Red cursed him, jarring Spink awake for a few minutes. Then the man was snoring defiantly in the chair across from Jenny. Abe began to see what she was up to. Both men must have put a long time in the saddle and they must have gotten pretty

AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

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cold. The warmth and quietude would get in its licks if they were made even partly complacent. So Abe leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes and began to snore himself as realistically as he could. It *might* work. . . .

He nearly fell into his own trap.

It was the racket that wakened him. He sat bolt upright to observe Jenny tying into Red like a wild cat. The man was down on one knee and bawling for Spink. Jenny had hold of his gun hand with both her own and was kicking at Red with her feet. Abe roared to his feet, realizing Jenny had managed to stay awake and caught Red nodding. That little cougar kitten had sneaked up, got caught at it, then had tied into the rustler.

Red yelled to rouse Spink, shameful as it must have felt to call for help against an enraged girl. Abe spun around and headed for Spink, who bolted out of his chair, though only half awake. The only way to connect with the man was with his boot, and Abe kicked. His long legs paid dividends. He caught Spink under the chin as the man came up. Spink's knees jerked like a man in a high leap. He hit the chair seat with the back of his head when he came down. Abe bent and scooped up the gun Spink hadn't managed to get hold of.

He was just in time. He whirled to see Red make a wrenching sweep with a massive arm. It tore Jenny loose, sent her sailing across the puncheon floor. Then Red flung a wicked grin at Abe and tried to swing his gun.

Abe had to fire, much as he disliked shooting a man in his own sitting room. Red's gun exploded but the slug hit the ceiling. The gun fell while Red grabbed his shoulder and bellowed in pain. Jenny cut in and grabbed the gun, and it was finished.

Abe had two prisoners he didn't care to be snowed in with for the winter. He didn't want them where they could put their filthy eyes on Jenny for another minute. But he had enough kindness to bandage Red's shoulder, to forego his promise to cut off the man's ears. Likely there was bounty on the pair. He didn't care. He just had to get rid of them. For the time being he took them to his root cellar, tossed in some blankets, and locked the two in there.

HE CAME back to the cabin to find Jenny Lee crying. "It's over, girl!" "Just the same," Jenny sobbed, "It's unsettling to have things like I've had happen!"

He let her press her face to his chest and cry. Didn't take her long to get it out of her system. She looked up presently, all but smiling.

"They made me hunt paper so Red could write you that note," she said. "I come across some writing you'd done. To a marrying agency. Read a couple of your letters before I tumbled. One said you'd like a wife who was small and pretty. Other said looks didn't matter so much if she was willing. What's that mean?"

Abe had a feeling his shirt collar was going to catch fire. "Nothin'," he muttered.

"Pooh," said Jenny. "You were trying to decide what kind of wife you want. You don't fall in love that way, mister. You just see somebody and pop goes the weasel. I've had it happen."

Abe swallowed. "Lately?"

"Seems like yesterday," Jenny said dreamily. Then she perked up to add, "Well, they brought your steers back. And I see you got through with the hay. Come a hard winter, and we'll do all right. We're set. Abe, I knew all along you could do it."

Abe put his hands on her shoulders and all but shook her. He said, "If you think I'm going to hole up all winter not married to you, you're crazy!"

"If I think that," said Jenny, flaming, "I sure am!"

At daylight Abe hitched up the mules again. The mules had had a good night's sleep; they knew the road. He tied his two prisoners, saw that they were supplied generously with blankets and made them get in the back of the sleigh. Jenny needed but little coaxing to mount the seat with Abe. Then they lined out through the blizzard for Castle Creek. They made it and delivered the prisoners to the sheriff. They got married and reached home just at dark.

Jenny loitered at the barn, helping Abe put up the mules, the way a wife should.

"When it comes to a pair of mountain mules—" he began.

"We do well enough, don't we?" said Jenny.

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Next

PUBLISHED

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

issue

AUGUST 1ST

Howdy, folks. Next issue features a blazing sixgun yarn by William Vance. It's a hard-hitting story about an hombre who was a mite *too* hard for his own and his neighbors' good. Dan Clayton was his name, and he prided himself on being beholden to no man: no matter how narrow the trail he might have to ride, he rode it alone.



So when the outlaw, Hobe Batson, shot his brother down and high-tailed it out of town, everyone in One Step knew Dan would never wait for a posse to bring him back.



Sure enough, he got *himself* sworn in as deputy. On the way out, he ordered his brother's widow, Evalina, to marry him. She didn't like orders and had plenty of spunk, but . . .



Like everyone else, she found that Dan was a hard man to stop once his mind was made up. But then he went on the prowl for his brother's killer . . .



And got into the strangest fight of his life, a fight in which the man he had to lick first—was *himself*! . . . The complete story, "The Rawhide Ranahan!", will appear in the next issue.

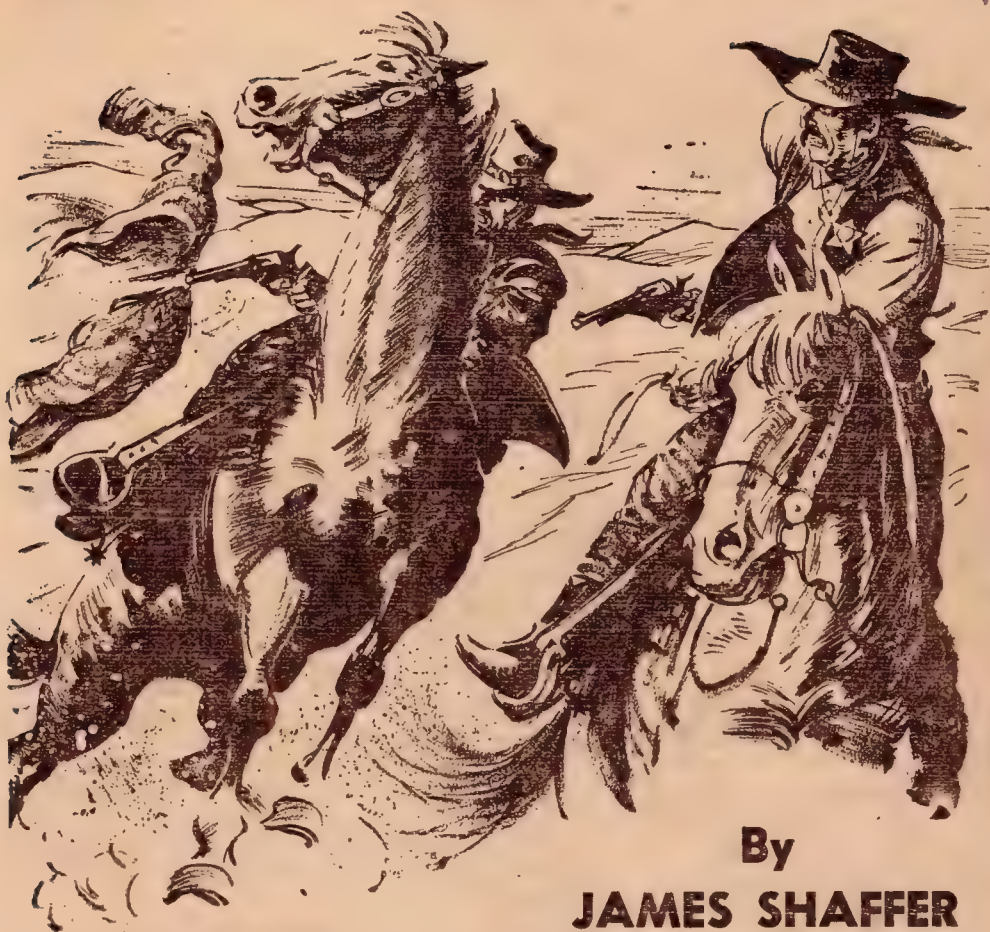
BAD TOWN FOR



He came up flinging the jacket straight at Matt Essley's horse. . . .

According to the town's ordinances, no Texan could stay there more than twenty-four hours. Wasn't it strange, then, that of all those Texas trail crews who hit the town with blazing guns, not one ever rode out again!

A TEXAN!



By
JAMES SHAFFER

CHAPTER

Cold Trail

1

The rain had stopped some time during the night, and the morning dawned bright and clear. Ordinarily, any town looked better after such a cleansing rain.

But to Clay Tompkins, the town of Wilkins looked just as frowsy as it had the night before. He stood on the porch of the hotel, rolling his after-breakfast smoke, and letting his eyes drift over the town.

Maybe, he thought morosely, it was just that he was beginning to hate all towns. Especially those towns that lay on the long

trail from the Texas cattle country to Abilene, Kansas.

He hated the sight of each new town as he approached it; hated it worse as it dropped out of sight behind. But he had to go on. Because in one of those towns, he would find the things he was looking for.

A rattle across the street drew his attention. It came from the store. Matt Essley, the storekeeper, was removing the iron shutters he put over his plate glass windows every night. It took a strong man to handle those iron shutters, but big Matt Essley was doing the job alone, and with apparent ease. He stacked them against the side of his store, then stood in the doorway of his

store, staring across the street at Clay.

Matt Essley didn't like Texans, Clay thought. Nobody in this town liked Texans. But it was especially curious that Essley didn't. Because Essley did a lot of business with trail crews going north with their herds, and those same trail crews going south with money in their pockets.

A dragging footfall on the sidewalk made Clay turn his head. Marshal Gar was strolling down the sidewalk, whittling on a stick.

"Wrong town, huh, Texan?" Gar asked. "So you're moving on?"

Clay studied the lawman a moment before replying. Gar had a long, thin face. His mouth was like a straight line drawn straight across the narrowest part of his face. His nose ran straight up from his mouth, and his eyes were close-set across the bridge of it. Gar didn't look like a man who would enjoy loafing and whittling. But since Clay had hit town yesterday afternoon, the marshal had done nothing but stand around and whittle.

"Yeah, looks like I drew a blank," Clay admitted. He shrugged as he came off the porch. "There's more towns between here and Abilene."

"You Texans are funny," Gar grunted. "You say you know your brother's dead. Most folks would let it lay like that. But you're riding a thousand miles or more, just looking for his grave."

"Not just his grave," Clay said softly. "His grave—and his killer."

He angled up the street toward the livery stable without waiting for Gar's reply. As he approached the stable, the liveryman led his horse outside. Clay nodded his thanks and tied his bedroll behind the saddle. It wasn't until he was tightening the cinch that the whole thing struck him as being funny.

He hadn't told the liveryman that he would be needing his horse this morning. And what was more, most of the liverymen he'd met wouldn't get near a ornery Texas bronc such as he was riding. But here was his horse, all ready to go.

"Better tighten that cinch," the hostler told Clay. "I started to, but the damn critter looked like he'd bite me, so I let 'im alone."

"He wouldn't bite hard," Clay told him with dry humor. "Wouldn't take more'n a couple inches of meat off'n your rump."

The bronc knew better than to fool with Clay, and stood quiet as Clay tightened the cinch. And as Clay did so, he looked across his saddle. Marshal Gar had moved across the street to the Essley store. He and Matt Essley were standing on the store porch. They had been watching him, but they turned their heads as Clay glanced that way.

It was the second thing that struck a warning note in Clay's mind. First, the horse had been ready. And then the storekeeper and the marshal. They seemed anxious to make sure he was leaving town.

He shoved his foot in the stirrup, and then he saw two more things that settled the matter in his mind. The first was a face. He only got a glimpse of it, but it was enough. Because it was a face peering at him through the heavily curtained window of the undertaking parlor. The curtains had lifted only for a moment, then had dropped back in place, but in that split second, Clay had caught sight of the face.

And the final thing that clicked in Clay's mind was a sign on a little barber shop across the street. The sign read simply:

FOR SALE.

He swung into the saddle, nodded curtly to the liveryman and touched his mount with the spur. At the edge of town he glanced back once, quickly. Marshal Gar had left Essley's store and was walking briskly toward his office farther down the street. Big Matt Essley had gone inside his store. And the curtains had been raised at the undertaking parlor.

A little too anxious, Clay thought grimly. A little too anxious to see me out of town. And I don't like that.

THERE were a lot of things he hadn't liked about his stay in Wilkins, now that he thought of it. In fact, the more he thought of it, the more he realized how lax he had become in his hunt.

First there was the matter of the undertaking parlor. The undertaker's was the first place he always stopped in each town. But in Wilkins the undertaker had been out. And no one seemed to know where he was, or when he'd be back. So Clay had asked his questions of the bartender. The same old question.

"Do you remember whether a young hombre, blond hair—looked sorta like me—

was killed and buried in this town? About six months ago?"

He'd asked his question all right, and now that he remembered back, he'd gotten his answers just a little too quick. So much for the undertaking end of it.

The next item was the cold hostility he'd felt the moment he'd ridden into Wilkins. He'd experienced the same feeling in a lot of towns. But he'd more or less expected it.

Trailing cattle to Abilene wasn't child's play. It was rough. And the men that did it, were apt to play rough when they hit a town. So Texans had gotten a bad name, and he'd found many towns not exactly friendly.

But yesterday in Wilkins, that hostile feeling had hit him in the face before he'd opened his mouth; before any one had heard his soft, Texas drawl.

And finally, there was the girl. Yesterday afternoon, when he'd ridden into Wilkins, it had been raining. There had been no women shopping around the various stores. So he had missed looking for the girl. And the girl, he told himself, was the most important thing. Once he found her, a lot of questions were going to be answered.

So he turned back. He rode for an hour before he turned back, and when he did, he didn't approach the town from the same direction from which he'd left. He didn't want Marshal Gar to see him ride back. And most especially, he didn't want that gent in the undertaking parlor to see him ride back.

It took him two hours to ride back, because he swung wide and approached Wilkins along a heavily wooded slope that ended at the outskirts of town. He left the ornery bronc at the edge of the woods and started walking through the residential part of town. He came within half a block of the business section of Wilkins and paused, studying the rear of the buildings. He picked out the rear of the saloon, Matt Essley's big store, and the undertaking parlor. He noted with satisfaction that the undertaking parlor had a back door.

The back door was locked, so he knocked. It took a long moment before he heard footsteps coming that way, and a man grumbling on the other side. The lock rattled and Clay shoved his foot against the door.

"Hey! What the devil's the mat—"

The man's ejaculation broke off at the sight of Clay. He tried to slam the door shut, but Clay's shoulder beat him to it. He slammed against the door, swinging it wide open, and stepped inside.

"Now listen, you—" the man started to bluster, but Clay cut him short.

"You'll listen first," he said curtly. "Then I'll listen while you answer the questions. You Murdock?" The sign on the front of the place proclaimed it to be Murdock's Funeral Parlor. The man nodded, a quick nervous jerk of his head.

"Looked for you yesterday," Clay went on.

"I—I was out of town," Murdock said quickly.

That was a lie, but Clay let it pass. The back of the place was dark and gloomy. Clay motioned the man into the front room. The shades had been let up and the sunshine streamed in the windows. Clay moved over to the light.

"Take a good look at me, Murdock. Did you bury a young gent that looked like me? It would have been about six months ago. He was my brother. We looked alike, except he was young. Three years younger, and he didn't have this scar like I've got on my cheek."

Murdock's nervousness seemed to increase. He was a small man with a doleful expression that seemed to go with his profession. He licked his lips nervously, and scrubbed his hands together.

"There's so many—uh—er—customers—it's hard—"

"Quit stalling!" Clay rapped out. "You're not so busy that you'd forget burying a gent that looked like me. A Texas trail hand. A blond kid. Full of devilment and liked to laugh a lot."

"I—I don't pay much attention to a man's looks," Murdock said huskily. "What's his looks mean to me? He's dead by the time I get to him—"

Clay cuffed him sharply across the face. It wasn't a hard blow, but it caught Murdock off balance. He squealed and staggered back against the wall with a bump.

"Talk, dammit!" Clay snapped. "I don't want to have to slug you around. But I aim to find out!"

"I'll check my records—"

"To hell with your records!" Clay rasped. "My brother coulda been buried

under any name. Like I said, I don't want to slug you—"

"That's good, Texan! 'Cause you ain't gonng git the chance!"

Clay spun, catching a momentary glimpse of the man hulking in the doorway just as the man charged. Big Matt Essley's face was twisted with hatred as he rushed. Clay tried to fade to one side, but Essley's fist crashed against the side of his head. The room spun before his eyes, and he staggered off balance. Essley growled with pleasure and bored in again.

Clay sidestepped the next rush, and Essley's fist merely grazed the side of his face. He swung for the big man's body, driving his fist into Essley's middle. The storekeeper snarled his hurt and hatred and lashed back. But now Clay's head had cleared and the numbness caused by Essley's first blow had gone.

He was a good twenty pounds lighter than the storekeeper, and he used that lack of weight to best advantage. He let the big man rush, and then he darted to one side, at the same time, throwing blows at Essley's face.

Essley growled with rage and tried to close with Clay. He rushed again and Clay retreated fast. His foot slipped on a small rug, and for an instant, it looked as if Essley would catch him. But he regained his balance in time. The rug, however, gave him an idea. As Essley rushed him again, he appeared to slip and almost fall. Essley rushed in blindly, and Clay swung for the man's chin.

It was like slugging the side of a beef at first. Once, twice, and three times his fist exploded against the bigger man's jaw. Essley took the first two blows in his stride, but the third shook him, and he gave ground. Clay darted ahead, lashing with his left.

"Murdock! You fool—a chair—" Essley gasped. He was in full retreat now, trying to cover up against Clay's driving fists. Then Clay saw the little undertaker snatching at a chair. He broke off with Essley and sprang backwards, his hand slapping toward his gun.

"Drop it, Texan!"

Clay didn't drop it. His gun was half out, and he held it that way as he turned once more toward the front door. It was Marshal Gar this time, and his heavy .45

muzzle gaped blackly at the Texan's belly.

"I said drop it, Texan," Gar's voice took on an edge. Clay glanced at the big storekeeper and then at Murdock. Essley was leaning against the wall, sleeveing sweat out of his eyes. The undertaker was huddled in a corner.

"Okay, Marshal," Clay said with a grin. "Just wanted to be sure the fight was over."

"What're you doing back in town?" Gar demanded.

"Told you yesterday," Clay said. "I'm looking for my brother."

"And I told you yesterday he wasn't killed in this town," Gar rasped.

"No law against my finding out for myself," Clay retorted.

"But there's a law against Texans loitering in this town," Matt Essley broke in. "No Texan stays in Wilkins more'n twenty-four hours. It's a town ordinance."

Clay grinned at Essley. "You got it a little wrong. Your town law says a man's got to have a visible means of support. A job, or a business. Your law is just against vagrants."

"You're a vagrant," Gar said. "So the law applies to you. Be on your way before your time is up."

Clay grinned at Gar and then at Essley. He knew now that he had made no mistake by coming back to Wilkins. He wondered what he could have been thinking about this morning when he'd made up his mind to leave town. Well, anyhow he thought, he was back. And maybe it was best the way he had worked it.

"I'll make sure I don't break any of your town laws, marshal," he said as he started for the back door. He paused and flung one last glance at Essley.

"You were mighty quick to get in here and side Murdock. Acted like you was half-way afraid of what Murdock might say."

"We don't allow Texans to come here and slug our friends, that's all," Essley answered, his voice choked with anger. Clay grinned and went on out. He could feel the eyes of the three of them on his back as he headed up the street. At the door of the little barber shop, he turned. They were still watching him.

THE barber was a short, fat man. There were a lot of laugh wrinkles in his face, but he wasn't smiling right now. He mo-

tioned Clay glumly to his one empty chair.

"That sign," Clay asked. "Does it mean what it says?"

"Sure does. I don't like this town. The shop—everything—is for sale."

"What's the matter with the town?" Clay asked sharply.

The man started to speak, then changed his mind. "Don't like the climate," he said shortly.

"It agrees with me," Clay said. "How much."

"One-fifty takes the works."

Clay nodded and dug into his pocket. A few moments later, the barber hurried out, pulling his coat on as he went. Clay stepped outside and lifted the sign from the nail. He was tearing it in two when Marshal Gar stepped out of Murdock's and walked over.

"It won't work, Texan," the marshal said sourly.

"It's already worked," Clay told him. "I'm in business. I ain't a vagrant. So I stay here for a while."

Gar's close set eyes regarded him intently. "Why are you so sure your brother was killed in Wilkins?"

"I'm not sure at all," Clay said. "What do you think?"

"How the hell should I know?" Gar grunted. He jerked a thumb up the street to where a little church stood. "There's a dozen or more Texas trail hands buried up there. They drift into town—git to fighting amongst themselves—or with the townspeople and then bang—one of 'em's dead. Murdock plants 'em. That's all."

"My brother looked a lot like me," Clay said. "He liked a good time, but he didn't need liquor to have a good time. Laughed a lot—"

"All Texans look alike to me," Gar grunted. He jerked his head toward the barber shop. "If that place don't make money, you'll still leave town—or get locked up as a vagrant."

"Why won't it make money?" Clay asked. "It's the only shop in town."

"This town don't like Texans," Gar said and walked off.

Clay watched him out of sight, then went back into the shop. He dragged a chair near the open door and sat down. Wilkins was beginning to stir. The business day was getting under way. He could see half

a dozen women going about their shopping up and down the street.

He pursed his lips and whistled a few bars of *Turkey in the Straw*. He made sure to whistle it just like Pat had always whistled it; with a little trill at the end of each chorus.

The barber shop, he decided was in a good place. It was right down town, and every woman and girl in town would pass its open door as she went about her shopping. He whistled that tune again, the way Pat always whistled it, and his hand crept toward his shirt pocket. He could feel the crumpled letter there. The last letter Pat had written. The letter that had put him on this long trail.

The letter had been handed Clay by a trail hand just back from Abilene. The man had known Pat.

"He asked me to pass the letter along to you so's you wouldn't worry," the trail hand said. "Seems he met some filly in one of them little trail towns and aimed to do some courting afore he come back."

"Which town?" Clay had asked, considerably annoyed. Pat was bringing back seven thousand dollars; money that was needed to re-stock their ranch. The money was needed, and so was Pat. There was plenty of work to be done around the ranch.

"Don't remember which town," the trail hand said with a sheepish grin. "You see, I invested most of my wages in whiskey in Abilene, and—"

Clay had swallowed his annoyance and read the letter. It was typical of Pat. Because Pat had forgotten to name the town he'd decided to visit a while, too.

I'm staying here a few days, the letter had read. There's a gal in this town. I want to make sure she remembers me the next time I ride this way. Don't git your dander up. She ain't no dance-hall floozie. Her pappy is religious. The job oughtn't to take more than a week. They's a dance next Saturday to which I am taking her, but she don't know that yet.

The letter had rambled on for two more pages, giving details of Pat's stay in Abilene. Pat liked to write, and he got long-winded on paper. He'd been seventeen when he'd been captured by the Federal

troops. He'd never learned to write till then.

But time hung heavy in the prison stockade, and he had sought out an educated prisoner who had taught him how to write. In the last two paragraphs of the letter, Pat had mentioned the money.

They paid me off in that green paper stuff. Call it money just like it was gold. I tried spending some in a store before I'd take it—to make sure it was good. You sure can pack a wad of that stuff in a little bundle. Be home as soon as I teach this gal how to whistle Turkey in the Straw.

Clay didn't take the letter out and read it again. He didn't have to. He knew every word of it by heart now. He remembered the long days that had followed the letter; waiting for Pat to ride through the notch in the hills and down the lane to the home ranch buildings.

But he never had. And at the end of two months, Clay had saddled up and ridden into town. He sought out trail hands who'd just returned from the long trip north. He questioned them about Pat.

"Didn't see 'im—and I hit every town from Abilene clean home. Anyhow, every saloon."

"Yep, I knowed Pat by sight. Didn't see him in no towns that we passed through coming home."

"Some of them trail towns is getting tough. They don't like us Texans. Say we play too rough. And I hear tell that some hands has been killed in them trail towns."

And at the end of two months, Clay had saddled up and headed north, along the trail to Abilene. The going was easy at first, especially so since he was still in Texas. He'd described Pat, the horse he was riding, and the fancy work on the kid's saddle. And the Texas towns had given him their answers.

"Nobody like that passed through here. I might not of remembered the man, but I'd sure remember the roan mare you described. And the saddle with the fancy stuff on it. Nope, he never passed through this town."

But after Clay had left Texas things had changed. The little towns weren't too friendly, and some were openly hostile to

Texans. Still, he had managed to get his questions answered, one way or another.

That is, they had been answered until he had reached Wilkins. And yesterday, he had tried to locate the undertaker all over town. But no one seemed to know where the man was, or when he'd be back.

The bartender in the town's biggest saloon was surly and his reply had been short and curt. He didn't try to remember every damn hell-raising Texan that passed through his bar. He only remembered the ones that wrecked the place, and then only long enough to make them pay for the damages.

Other answers had been just as sullen, and things had come to a climax about supper time when Marshal Gar had stopped him.

"There's a law in this town," Gar had rasped. "Texans are allowed to stay here just long enough to pick up some supplies and a jug of liquor. Then they move on."

"It might take me a mite longer than that," Clay had returned quietly.

"Better watch your tongue, or you'll be here for a real stay," Gar had threatened. "In jail."

All this, Clay turned over in his mind as he sat in the open doorway of his shop and watched Wilkins stir into life. A girl came walking down the street. She looked a little old for Pat, Clay thought, but it was worth a try. As the girl drew near, he started whistling Turkey in the Straw, with the little trills that Pat always used. The girl flung a casual glance his way and continued down the street.

CHAPTER

2

Bushwhack Town

Noon came, and he saw Matt Essley leave his store and go out to lunch. Essley started up the street right behind a young girl. The girl looked too young for Pat this time; like a school girl. But Clay wasn't overlooking any bets. As she drew near, he puckered his lips and swung into his tune. The tune had no effect on the girl, but he saw Matt Essley stiffen suddenly and break his long-legged stride.

For a moment, the storekeeper looked around wildly for the source of the tune; until his eyes fell on Clay. Then his square face, still bearing Clay's knuckle marks,

turned hot with anger. He stopped in the doorway.

"How long you think you can stay in business in this town; Texan?" he rasped out. Clay was grinning now; but there was no mirth in his grin. It was cold and hard. He was remembering the effect his whistling had on the storekeeper. "Long enough, Essley. Long enough," he said softly, and watched the man's eyes. He saw the quick change of expression in them, but he couldn't be certain whether the look was fear, surprise, or just plain hatred. Whatever it was, he knew that he had gotten under Essley's skin.

"Me and the rest of the merchants'll run you out inside of two days," Essley blustered. "We don't like Texans in this town."

"Unless they're carrying a money belt stuffed with greenbacks, huh, Essley?" Clay shot the words out with bullet suddenness. Essley's face blanched a moment, and he took a backward step, as if he'd been hit a physical blow. His eyes flared wide with hatred, then narrowed with cunning.

"You like to talk in riddles, Texan," he jeered. "We'll give you a riddle to solve. How to git the tar and feathers off, when we ride you out of town on a rail."

He turned on his heel and strode off up the street. Clay got out of his chair and stepped out on the sidewalk.

"I might talk in riddles, Essley," he called softly, "but they're riddles that you know the answers to."

Essley's big shoulders hunched up with anger, but he didn't break his stride, or turn back. Clay turned back into the shop and rolled a smoke; satisfaction flooding through him.

He'd broken the first chink in the armor of silence that surrounded this town. And it strengthened the feeling that he'd had this morning; the feeling that Matt Essley knew plenty about Pat's death. He got his smoke going and his eyes settled on the figure of Marshal Gar. The lawman had watched the whole thing between him and Essley.

"The two of them," Clay told himself softly. "The two of them in it together. Maybe some more in on it, too. The undertaker, for instance. But those two, for sure. And why not? It's a natural. Trail hands would spend money in Essley's store. He'd find out how much of a bankroll they

were carrying. The town ordinance gives Gar the right to order a man to leave town—or be killed. And the undertaker could swear the man was carrying no money, or papers that gave his name."

Yes, there it was, the whole little scheme, he thought bitterly. But now that he knew, what could he do about it? He was a stranger in this town, and a Texan besides. And this town didn't like Texans. Then he shrugged.

He'd gotten this far. He'd found out this much. He'd find a way to finish the job, somehow. . . .

It was late afternoon before the right girl passed by. And Clay almost missed her. He did miss her when she walked down town. He had a customer. Another Texan. The trail hand had staggered into his shop with a belly full of whiskey and fallen asleep in the chair. Clay was having a time getting the whiskers off, and the girl was past his shop before he could whistle.

But on the way back, he was ready. He saw her step out of the Bon Ton Millinery Shop, and start up the street.

"That red hair," he muttered. "Pat woulda seen that red hair a mile away."

He left the Texan still sleeping in his barber chair as the girl drew near. She was just opposite his doorway when he started whistling. The girl started quickly and one of her packages slipped from her head. Clay stepped out to pick it up. As he handed it back, he looked into her eyes.

It was the girl, all right. The whole thing was written in her eyes. He saw the stark horror in them that time hadn't as yet wiped out. And when he stood up, and she got a look at his face, he saw that she recognized him, and the fear that caused her eyes to flutter wildly.

She almost snatched the bundle from him and hurried on up the street. Clay went back in his shop, but he kept his eye on the girl until she entered the house up the street. The house was right beside the church.

Of course! She was the preacher's daughter. Pat had mentioned in his letter that her father was religious. He picked up a pitcher of cold water and doused his customer. The man came awake sputtering and cursing.

"Shave yourself," Clay told him. "You kin do a better job than me anyhow."

HE STARTED toward the preacher's house. As he neared the church he noticed the small graveyard behind it, and he veered that way. He was opening the little gate of the picket fence around the graveyard when he saw the girl hurrying toward him.

"You—you shouldn't have come," she blurted out quickly. "You're in danger here."

"You know I'm Pat Tompkins' brother." For the first time, he was really noticing her, and the anger he'd felt for Pat loitering along the home trail subsided somewhat. The burnished gold of her hair seemed like a halo for the delicately rounded oval of her face. Her eyes were deep blue, and they accentuated the full redness of her lips.

"Of course you're Pat's brother. No one could miss the resemblance. That's why you're in danger as long as you're in Wilkins."

He shook his head slowly. "I'm not in danger. The man or men that killed Pat—they're in danger." He nodded toward the neat little graveyard.

"Is—is he in there?"

She nodded, and he saw the tears well up in her eyes. "I should have known you were in town. For you see, some one pulled his headstone up, during the night. I noticed it this morning. They—they didn't want you to see it."

"Who is they?"

Her hand flew to her throat, and her eyes widened with fear. "I—I don't know."

"That's not true," he told her gently. "You do know—"

"No! No! I don't! No one in town knows who they are!"

"You mean this has happened before? Pat wasn't the only one. There have been others." He stepped closer and gripped her shoulders. "You know who they are! Tell me!"

"Cherry!" the voice roared at them from the little parsonage. Clay saw a tall, angular man step off the front porch and hurry toward them.

"Get into the house, Cherry!" the man ordered. The girl slipped away and hurried toward the house. The man strode toward Clay. "And who, sir, are you—"

Clay grinned as the preacher's words trailed off into silence. "I see you know who I am," he said quietly.

"I haven't the faintest idea who you are," the preacher said loudly. "But I'll warn you to leave my daughter alone." He turned and would have walked off, if Clay hadn't grabbed his arm.

"I want to have a little talk with you, Mr.—uh—"

"Hobart," the preacher replied. "Silas Hobart." He tried to edge off, but Clay's grip on his arm was firm.

"You know who I am. Pat Tompkins' brother. You know why I'm here." He jerked a thumb toward the little graveyard. "I need more information from you."

Hobart's long face seemed to grow haggard all of a sudden. He shook loose from Clay's grip.

"The best information I can give you, Tompkins, is to ride out of town. Right now. Unless you want to be buried in the grave next to his."

"I'm not as easy to bury as Pat was," Clay said with a rasp in his voice. "Nobody in this town will tell me anything. They're all afraid to talk—or they're all in the same crooked deal. I want to know which!"

Hobart stared down the street for a long moment before he turned back.

"The night your brother was killed there was a wild trail bunch in town. They were drunk—riding up and down the street shooting their guns off. Treeing that town, I think they call it. About ten minutes after they'd left, your brother was found, mortally wounded. That's the whole story."

"Yeah," Clay said bitterly. "That's the story that you're supposed to tell—to anyone snooping around. But it's not the story I want. I want the real story. The truth—"

A faint yell from downtown caught his ear. Hobart shouted and pointed. Smoke was billowing above the tops of the buildings down town. Fire! Hobart broke free and started racing toward the flames, shouting the warning as he ran. Others took up the shouting.

"It's the hotel—no, the hardware store—no, it's—"

Pat swore, as he jog trotted toward town. He didn't have to be told what was burning. It was his little barber shop. The lumber was dry as timber, and the flames were soaring high as he reached the edge of the crowd. Matt Essley was forming a bucket brigade.

"Don't try to save the shop!" Essley roared. "It's a goner! Wet down the buildings on each side! Keep the flames from spreading!"

Marshal Gar lent his voice to Essley's and the bucket brigade went to work. Blankets were soaked with water and flung over the roofs of the adjoining buildings. Men trailed high flying sparks to the spot where they landed and sloshed water on them. Other men with wet gunny sacks fought a dozen little fires the sparks had started.

Clay started to shoulder his way through the crowd and join the bucket brigade. Then he stopped and turned back. His little shop was going up as fast as the greedy flames could devour it. The fire fighters seemed capable of keeping the fire from spreading. Clay walked over and sat on the hotel porch steps.

Twilight came as the flames reached their highest. And the street was almost dark when the building caved in, sending a million sparks shooting skyward. The bucket brigade fought the sparks and beat them; then wet down the smoldering embers of the little barber shop. Marshal Gar detailed two men to keep an eye on the ashes until the last spark was out, and then led the way to the saloon. Clay strolled over.

The babble of voices at the bar died down as he stepped through the doors. Matt Essley lowered his glass of beer and threw Clay a glance; a grin showing his white teeth against his blackened face.

"Looks like you're out of business, Texan," Essley said, not quite able to keep the jeering note from his voice.

"Never was in it," Clay said quietly. "I bought that shop as an excuse to stay in town until I found out who killed my brother."

The words seemed to drop into a pool of silence. The grin was still frozen on Essley's face, but the big man had shifted his beer glass to his left hand, and his right hand dangled close to the butt of his sixgun. Marshal Gar was a few feet from Essley. He pushed away from the bar now.

"You're stubborn, ain't you, Texan?" he rasped. "You claim your brother was killed in this town. You got any proof?"

The silence still held in the saloon. It was torn suddenly by the shattering of a glass on the floor. Clay jerked his eyes

toward the source of the sound. It was Preacher Hobart, standing off to one side, well away from the bar. Clay looked at the shattered glass and the wet spot on the sawdust.

"You dropped your glass of milk, Preacher."

"You got any proof your brother was killed in this town?" Marshal Gar insisted. Clay turned back to the lawman, the memory of Hobart's haggard look still in his mind.

The preacher was scared. It showed in his eyes. There had been fear in them; fear and pleading. He had dropped the glass purposely to draw Clay's attention, and his eyes had pleaded with Clay.

"No real proof as yet," Clay told Gar. "But I aim to get it. And it won't take me too long."

"When you get proof that your brother was killed in this town, bring the proof to me. If an arrest is in order, I'll make it. But if you try to take the law in your own hands, I'll kill you. Understand?"

"I heard every word you said, Gar," Clay said and spun on his heel.

IT WAS ten o'clock that night when Clay tapped lightly on the back door of the Hobart home. For a long moment there was silence inside, then the door opened cautiously, and he saw the faint moonlight glint on a gunbarrel.

"I've been expecting a visit from you," Hobart's deep voice came from the gloom inside. "But you've made your visit for nothing. I've nothing further to say to you."

"First time I ever knew a preacher to carry a gun," Clay said, ignoring the preacher's words.

"A man needs protection in this town. Now go."

Clay shook his head stubbornly. "I want to talk to you. No one saw me come here, so you've nothing to fear."

"You're mistaken about not being seen," Hobart answered. "A man can't move in this town without someone knowing it."

"I used my rope to drop from the second story room of the hotel," Clay went on. "No one followed me. And you, Hobart, know the answers to the questions I want to ask."

He heard the girl's low voiced argument

with her father inside, then Hobart's rumbling answer. After a moment, the door swung wider.

"Come in," Hobart said. "We'll sit here in the kitchen and talk. Without a light."

Clay whistled softly as he stepped into the kitchen. "It's as bad as that, huh? Why does this town put up with it?"

"What are you talking about?"

"This fear," Clay snapped. "The whole town's got it."

"I wasn't aware that the whole town was living in fear," Hobart answered raggedly. "All I know is that—I—I got a note."

"What kind of note?" Clay asked eagerly.

"First, I'll have to explain something," Hobart said. Clay was conscious that the girl was moving about the darkened kitchen. He heard the rattle of cups as she fixed coffee.

"I was the person that found your brother—after he'd been shot," Hobart said. "And he was still alive."

"And he talked?" Clay leaned forward in his intensity. "He told you who shot him? Who, man? Who?"

Hobart held up his hand. "He tried to talk. But he was too far gone. I called for help and we took him into the doctor's office. Pat was still trying to talk, but he was too weak to make himself understood."

"There was quite a crowd in the doctor's office. *And someone in that crowd feared that Pat had talked to me when I had found him.*"

"And you got a note?"

Hobart nodded. "Later that night. It was wrapped around a rock and thrown in the window. It warned me that if I talked, they wouldn't harm me. They would harm Cherry."

"Oh."

Clay felt the anger rising within him. He knew that he was dealing with skunks, but until now, he didn't realize just how low down his opponents were. But if such men would harm a girl to save their necks, they'd stoop to anything. He sipped his coffee, thinking hard.

"Matt Essley won't talk. Neither will Marshal Gar. But that undertaker—he's the weak link in their chain—"

"What're you saying?" Hobart demanded quickly. Clay jerked erect. He was not aware that he'd been talking, mumbling his thoughts aloud.

"I was figuring what was the weakest point in their armor," he grunted.

"Whose armor?" Hobart demanded in a shaky voice.

"Why try to bluff at being ignorant, Hobart?" Clay snapped. "You know who they are—the whole town knows. Essley, Gar and Murdock, the undertaker. Essley spots the victim when the man spends money in his store. Gar does the shooting, and Murdock does the burying. Am I right?"

"There's—there's no proof—" Hobart muttered, and his cup rattled loudly as he set it down on the table.

Cherry came over and sat down near Clay. "Dad's right. There's no proof. And you're right. The whole town knows who is behind the killings in this town. Only, well—"

"Go ahead," Clay said grimly.

"About a month before your brother was killed," Hobart said, "another man rode into town—looking for the killers of his son. At that time there were people in Wilkins who had the nerve to dislike the killings. They tried to help the man find the guilty parties."

"And?"

"The man is buried beside his son. Two citizens of Wilkins were killed. Two more left town, and have never returned. So you see—"

"Since then nobody has had the nerve to raise a fuss when some trail hand is found shot to death around this burg, huh?"

"That's the size of it," Hobart said quietly. "If there was any way I could help you, I would. But there is none. There is no proof that the men you named have had anything to do with the killings."

"And if you ask too many questions," Cherry said, "it means a bullet in the back."

"Yes," Hobart said sadly. "They have reached the point now where they are bold with their killing. They will not hesitate to kill you when they feel you are getting close to their secret."

Clay finished his coffee and rolled a smoke, but the preacher's hand clamped over his as he started to strike the match. That simple act brought back to him the fear under which these people lived. He picked up his hat, knowing that he would find out nothing more here.

"Be careful," Cherry said softly as she

opened the back door for him. The two words sent a queer thrill through Clay. He stood just outside the door for a moment, savoring the feeling, wondering what it was; wondering why two softly spoken words could affect him as powerfully as they had.

He returned to the hotel along the same way he had come. His room faced to the rear of the building, and he fumbled a moment in the dark, feeling for the rope. He didn't find it. He felt some more, and then swiftly he realized that the rope was gone.

Instantly, with the realization, he was fading back into the dark shadows. He stepped carefully, making no noise, his gun clear of leather. Someone had either watched him slide down that rope, or had entered his room and discovered it. In any event, they had removed his means of re-entering his room. And they must have had a reason for that.

He paused at the corner of the hotel building, looking up the alley toward the dimly lit main street of Wilkins. A hard knot formed in his stomach, and his lips were suddenly dry and hot.

The only way now to regain his room was to show himself on the street. And when he did that—his breathing became shorter and quicker. Then he caught himself angrily. He hadn't expected this trip to be a picnic. He had expected eventually to run into this situation.

Slowly, carefully, he reviewed his position, checking the lay of the town in his own mind. They would expect him to find the rope missing. And they would expect him to walk down this alley and into the street. They'd be watching that alley. He turned and went the other way.

CHAPTER

3

Clay Gives Up

It was a five minute walk around the block, because he forced himself to walk in a steady, measured tread. It helped calm his nerves; and helped his whole body reach that state of alertness that he knew he would need shortly.

He turned into the main street a block below the hotel. The main street was almost deserted; as if the town knew what was

going on. He walked a hundred feet up the street, then stepped into a doorway and lit a cigarette. From the doorway, he surveyed the entire street.

But he could see nothing unusual. His eyes then flicked toward the darkened part of the streets, and he put himself in the position of men who would be watching the alleyway. After a long moment, he tossed his cigarette away and walked on. He was watching certain places now; certain that his hunters would be in those places.

He was passing the darkened front of Murdock's funeral parlor when the break came. Up ahead, something stirred restlessly in the shadow of the hardware store. A boot scraped on the rough plank sidewalk. Clay kept on walking. A moment later, the shadow up ahead moved. A startled cry, almost choked back, came out of the shadows.

"Hey! Look out!" the voice rose in a fearful screech; quivering and twisting in its fear. Clay faded to one side, his gun lifting toward the shadows, but waiting for the first shot.

It came. A jagged spear of flame from the shadows; a thunderclap of noise in the silence. He heard the bullet whine close by. The man in the shadows screeched again.

Clay had recognized the voice now. It belonged to Murdock, the undertaker. The man fired the second time. Then Clay's gun bucked against the palm of his hand. Murdock's scream turned from fear to pain. The undertaker staggered out in the street, his gun dropping from his fingers, his hands clutching his stomach.

"He shot me—he *shot* me—"

Murdock's screech was drowned out suddenly by the blast of other guns. Clay flopped forward, flat on his face. It seemed to him, in that split second, that Wilkins was a solid sheet of gunfire. But the moment passed and he counted only three guns. They hammered and roared at him from the darkness, and he fired back.

He fired back and rolled over. Slugs hit the dirt where he'd been. He fired again and leaped to his feet, racing for the protection of a building. He reached it, flattened himself against the boards and lifted his gun.

But there was nothing to shoot at. The town was as quiet as a tomb. The click of his gunhammer as he cocked it was loud

and strident in the eerie silence. His eyes probed the darkness, from whence the gunfire had lashed out at him. But nothing moved.

Nothing in the shadows. But suddenly a horse broke out of a side street, and thundered out of town. Clay flung a slug at the rider, but the light was bad, and the man was a moving target. Horse and rider disappeared into the night.

The seconds dragged on. Clay hugged his building and waited. He saw cautious heads poked out of saloon doors, and finally, a man ventured carefully into the street. Still Clay waited, tensed and ready.

The tenseness ran out of him, however, at the sight of two men stepping out of the hotel. Marshal Gar and Matt Essley.

The distance was great, but Clay noticed that each man seemed to be breathing hard, as if they'd been running. Gar bawled a question, and some one answered him guardedly. Then, with a great show of surprise, the marshal and the storekeeper noticed the body of Murdock in the street. Matt Essley bellowed threats as he and the lawman rushed toward the body. Clay carefully refilled the chambers of his gun.

A crowd was gathering around Murdock now. Clay could hear Essley and Gar asking questions in a loud, arrogant voice. He was ready to step into the street when a light footfall made him whirl.

"It's me, Cherry."

Clay let his breath gust out in a heavy sigh. The girl had slipped quietly up the darkened street.

"I heard the shooting. I—I was afraid of what had happened. Did they—are you all—"

"Murdock's nerve broke." Swiftly, he told her what had happened. Of the rope being missing, and the ambush planned as he stepped out of the alley. And then of the sudden end of the fight.

"It's the way they work," the girl said. "When they saw that you would fight, they quit. They will wait until they can kill you without danger to themselves. You've got to leave town."

Clay glanced at the crowd, a growing wonder possessing him. So far, not a soul had ventured down this way. And yet everyone must know that the bullets that had killed Murdock had been fired from this end of the street. Gar and Essley were still

talking loudly. The girl tugged at Clay's arm and he allowed her to draw him off the main street.

"You can get your horse from the livery now—before the crowd breaks up," the girl said urgently. "They won't follow you. They'll be content when you've left town."

"I never run from a fight before," Clay growled.

"No, not a fair fight. But they won't fight you fair. They'll merely sneak up on your back and murder you. Let's hurry."

The livery stable was deserted and Clay quickly saddled his bronc. He was swinging into the saddle, when he remembered something.

"Say! After I shot Murdock, there were still three guns shooting at me. That means there were four of them to begin with. The fourth man rode out of town. Who's he?"

"I don't know—unless it would be Buck Eades."

"Who's he?"

"He works for Matt Essley. Essley owns a ranch out of town. Eades runs it for him."

Clay turned quickly. "Where's the ranch?" he demanded. "This gent Eades—he's the man to work on now! If I can make him talk—"

"You've got to save yourself while you can!" the girl burst out. "There's nothing you can do—"

He grabbed her fiercely by the shoulders and shook her. "You thought a lot of Pat, didn't you?" he rasped. "You'd like to see his killers brought to justice? You'd like to quit living under this cloud of fear? Then tell me!"

For a moment, he thought the girl was going to cry. But she fought back the tears, and then he felt her shoulders tense under his grip.

"I'll do more than that. I'll take you there!"

IT WAS past midnight when they saw the blur of the ranch buildings ahead. The girl had explained that Eades was foreman of the ranch, and that there were usually two or three other men working under him. Hearing that, Clay had decided to wait till morning to pay Eades a visit.

"I want to talk to him by himself—with no crew around," he explained to the girl. "Come morning, Eades ought to send his men out in different directions to work.

We'll watch our chance to catch Eades by himself."

He shook out his bed roll and handed the girl his blankets. "You sleep," he ordered. "I'll watch."

He awakened her at the first streaks of dawn, and as it grew lighter, they moved back into a clump of trees a quarter of a mile from the ranch. They watched the crew come out of the bunkhouse; saw the smoke rise from the ranchhouse as breakfast was cooked, then saw Eades give the men their orders.

The crew roped horses, saddled them and rode off for the day's work. Eades yawned, rolled a smoke and lounged on the big front porch of the ranchhouse. Clay chuckled.

"Couldn't be better. Let's go." They went the rest of the way on foot, approaching the house from the rear. Buck Eades was not aware of their presence until Clay stepped around the corner of the house, his gun leveled.

"Lift 'em, Eades," he ordered brusquely. The foreman blustered and swore as Clay disarmed him. He handed the gun to the girl and she shoved it in the pocket of the beaded leather jacket she was wearing. Clay waited patiently until the tirade had ended.

"I want evidence against Essley and Gar," Clay told him flatly, and waved him silent as Eades started to protest. "Evidence that they killed my brother, Pat Tompkins. Shot him, then robbed him of fourteen thousand dollars."

"Fourteen!" the word shot out of Eades' mouth before he could stop it. Clay grinned.

"They kinda gypped you on the split, didn't they, Buck? Wanta talk?"

"About what?" Eades blustered. "I don't even know what you're blabbing about."

Clay sighed and handed the girl his gun. "Then we'll do it the hard way." He stepped forward. Eades swung, but he was too eager. Clay ducked under the blow and planted a hard right on the man's mouth. Eades went backwards, spitting blood. Clay leaped forward, then stopped, staring hard at the man. Eades stood firm for a moment, hands raised in defense. Then he began to squirm uneasily under Clay's steady scrutiny.

"Maybe I can save myself a lot of energy—and pick up some easy cash besides,"

Clay said softly. "Never liked bounty money much. But there's times when it—"

"Damn you, you're just bluffing!" Eades growled.

Clay chuckled inwardly. It hadn't been altogether a bluff. He had figured that birds of a feather would flock together. He had figured that Eades was a crook. And that he was wanted somewhere. And his lie about the amount of money Pat had been carrying. Eades' reaction to that had told him that Eades was in on the setup. Eades was getting his split.

"Want to talk, Eades?" he asked softly. "Save yourself a beating right now—and maybe a neck stretching if I decide to collect that bounty."

"Go to hell!" the man spat sullenly.

Clay shrugged and moved in again. But Clay's talk had confused Eades. Confused and shaken, he lashed out with a wild haymaker. Clay ducked easily; caught Eades off balance and smashed a fist against his mouth again.

"Better think it over, Eades," Clay counseled. "Better play along with me. All I want is a few words, written on a piece of paper. Give me that, and you can have the fastest horse on the place, and all the start you want. The other way—" he shrugged—"well, maybe you'll talk just before they spring the trap on you."

Eades lowered his hands. "Yuh mean it?" he asked hoarsely. "If I write you what you want, you'll let me go?"

"I ain't caring what you did some place else," Clay said. "I want the man that killed my brother."

"I didn't do it," Eades grunted. "Gar done it. He does the shooting. Essley spots the men. Gar does the shooting. Murdock planted 'em. My job was just to steer trail crews into town—"

"Put that in writing," Clay said briskly, bringing out a notebook and a pencil. "Write 'er down, and you're free to go."

Eades nodded and took the pencil. He licked it, opened the notebook and started to write. The bullet hit him before Clay heard the sound of the shot. Eades staggered.

Clay swore in anger and leaped toward the girl. He knocked her flat just as another bullet whined overhead. He snatched his gun and flung two shots toward the clump of trees in which he and the girl had hidden.

But the range was too far for a sixgun.

Eades was still on his feet, a look of puzzled pain on his face. He tried to reach the spot in his back where the bullet had hit. The hidden rifle crashed again and Eades folded silently downward. Clay leaped for the front door of the house. In the living room he found a rifle and rushed outside again.

Two shots drove the bushwhacker from cover. They had one fleeting glimpse of the man as his horse carried him swiftly out of sight. There could be no mistaking the broad back of Matt Essley. Clay fired one last futile shot and then bent over Eades.

"Dead before he hit the ground," he said dully. The girl shuddered and slipped the jacket from her shoulders. She laid it carefully over Eades' frozen features. Clay stood up.

"But I got what I wanted," he said flatly. "I found out who did the killing, and that's what I wanted to know. My man is Marshal Gar. I've known it all along, but I wanted to make sure."

He jacked the empties from his gun and slid fresh cartridges into place. His face was set and bleak.

"I can finish my job in two minutes, once I'm back in Wilkins. And then go back home."

"You'll never be able to go home again, if you kill Gar," the girl told him. "Gar is an officer of the law. You will have to prove that he stepped outside the law. If you don't, killing him will put you outside the law."

CLAY nodded thoughtfully. He'd thought of that. And he knew now that there was no way to prove Gar's guilt. There were only two of the original band of killers left: Essley and Gar. Both strong men. Both callous men. Both men with iron nerve.

Neither of them would ever crack the way Murdock had; nor would they talk the way Eades had offered to do. He shook his head slowly.

"If that's the way it is—that's the way it will have to be. There's no way to prove that Gar was a killer—"

"Yes, there is a way," Cherry Hobart said quietly. He glanced at her quickly, and then at the still form of Buck Eades.

"No, I won't let you do it," he snapped. "It would be too risky. Those men are killers, and they'd stop at nothing to save their necks."

"I'm a witness," Cherry said firmly. "I heard Eades confess and name Gar and Essley as killers. In court—"

"You'd never live to reach court!" Clay snapped out. "Gar nor Essley would hesitate at killing you to save their necks!"

"But if you kill Gar—without a trial—it will put you on the wrong side of the law for the rest of your life!"

Clay's lips thinned. He nodded briefly. Suddenly the girl sobbed and threw her arms around his neck. "I won't let you do it, Clay. I won't! I won't!"

He pushed her away roughly. "Are you forgetting Pat?" he rasped. "Are you—"

"I'm not forgetting Pat," the girl cried. "Pat never loved me, nor I him. He was just a happy-go-lucky kid. He spoke to me the first day he was in town, and I didn't speak back. He said he was going to stay in town till I gave in and let him take me to a dance. There was never anything between us, except some good-natured joshing—Clay, I love you! And I don't want to love an outlaw!"

He kissed her. Long and hard, forgetting everything for the moment, except the feel of her lips against his. Then he pushed her away.

"It's got to be done my way. I can't let you risk your life. If anything—"

He broke off as the sound of horses reached their ears. Three horses, coming fast. A moment later, they were in sight, and he heard Cherry's gasp of fear. Marshal Gar and Matt Essley were riding toward the house. The girl's father was in between them. Suddenly a gun flashed in Gar's hand. He shoved the muzzle against Hobart's side.

"We're riding in, Tompkins!" Gar called. "Make a move toward your gun and I'll blast Hobart!"

Matt Essley pulled his horse to a halt and waved the others to a stop.

"Cherry!" he bellowed. "Lift Tompkins' gun and throw it on the ground. Quick! If you want your father to live!"

Clay kept his hands raised high as the girl followed Essley's orders. The three rode forward again. Clay bent toward the girl.

"Let me do the talking," he told her swiftly. "Don't say a word. Let me do it all—and agree with anything I say!"

"You're going to tell them that Eades died without talking," the girl answered, half accusingly.

"Those two are killers," Clay said quickly. "I tell you, they'll stop at nothing. Let me talk. I'll bow and scrape. Let me talk—and maybe I can talk us out of this!"

"It's not your nature to bow and scrape," the girl replied. "And you've never learned to beg and plead—"

"Cherry! Are you all right?" Hobart slid out of the saddle and hurried to his daughter. It was then that Clay saw the burn marks in the palms of the preacher's hands. Hobart caught Clay's glance and lifted his eyes in mute appeal.

"I tried not to tell where you two had gone," he said, "but I—I couldn't stand it any more. Essley left first—before day-break. Then Gar got nervous and we followed. We met Essley a mile from here, riding back toward town. The shots—I—I thought—that Cherry—"

"The shots you heard was Essley killing Buck Eades," Clay said with a tight grin. Hobart's face went white.

"I—I was hoping that you two had seen nothing—to incriminate Essley or Gar—"

"He means we don't like to have live witnesses running around loose," Gar put in sardonically, lifting his gun suggestively. Cold sweat was breaking out on Clay's spine, but he managed to shrug casually.

"What's wrong with killing Eades?" he asked. "He was a wanted outlaw. Bounty on him, even. You're a public benefactor, Essley."

"Yeah, that's right," Essley laughed harshly. "I shut Eades up for good to save him from talking, and get a reward for doing it, too."

Clay shrugged and picked up the notebook that had fallen from Eades' hand.

"You were just in time, too," he said drily. "Another minute and Eades would have put it in writing." He glanced up at the two killers. "Another minute and I would have had the evidence to hang both of you." He flung the notebook in a gesture of disgust and defeat. "As it was, I have nothing on either of you."

"Interesting if true," Gar murmured through a cold grin.

"It's true enough," Clay went on. "If Eades had named the killer, I'd go after him, no matter what—"

"Providing you was in a position to go after him," Essley put in softly. Clay looked into Essley's eyes and saw the hard mercifineness in them.

"So we're to get the same that Eades got. Is that it?"

"That's the safe way to do it. And we always play safe," Gar said.

"It don't sound safe to me," Clay went on easily. "Killing me—yeah, that makes sense. But a preacher and his daughter. That's hard to cover up."

He saw the glance that shot between the two of them, and knew that his argument had struck home. It's easy enough to cover up an occasional killing of a friendless trail hand. But a daughter and her father—and especially when the father is a preacher.

"Mebbe you're right there," Gar grunted thoughtfully. "But I'd sleep better at night, if I knowed you was with your brother."

Clay sighed. He'd partly won his argument to let Cherry and her father go. He could swing it now, he thought.

"Why not let Cherry and her father ride on back to town?" he asked. "Me—I'll hit the trail for Texas. Right now."

AGAIN the two killers glanced at each other, and Clay could almost read their thoughts. They'd let him get down the trail a few miles, then a well placed slug in the back would 'put him with Pat.' Hobart and Cherry could return home. They could see that the preacher and his daughter left town.

Yes, that would be the easiest way out. It would save them from having to cover up the killing of Cherry and her father.

"Might be a good idea," Gar said slowly. He pointed. "That trail there—it'll take you to Texas—"

"That trail is rough and slow!" Cherry cried. "They could overtake you and—"

"One trail's as good as another," Clay cut in swiftly. "I'll be going."

"Not so fast," Essley grunted. He folded his arms over his saddlehorn. "Hobart, I think you've stayed about as long in Wilkins as you want to, ain't you? You and Cherry both?" he added significantly.

"Yes," Hobart nodded. "There are other towns."

"Good," Essley grunted. "You and Cher-

ry will ride back to town with me. I'll see you off on the noon stage. As soon as you're gone, Tompkins can hit the trail toward Texas." He cut a glance around to the marshal. "How about it, Gar?"

"Sounds all right," the marshal admitted. "I'll ride down the trail a ways with Tompkins to see that he doesn't get lost."

Clay sighed heavily. He knew that Gar intended to murder him as soon as Cherry and her father were safely out of the way. But he'd just have to take his chances on that. Maybe he'd be lucky, and maybe he wouldn't. The main thing was that Cherry and Hobart would be safe.

"Well, that's settled," he said, forcing a cheerful note into his voice. "Let's get—"

"Nothing has been settled," Cherry Hobart broke in.

"Cherry—" Clay yelled, but the girl was going on.

"Buck Eades talked before he was shot. He named Marshal Gar as the killer, and you, Matt Essley, as his accomplice. I intend to swear out a warrant—"

"Damn!" Gar exploded. "And we damn near let that slick-tongued Texan talk us into letting the girl go!"

"Cherry! Why did you talk?" Clay groaned.

"Because Gar intends to kill you, as soon as dad and I are gone. I—I don't see any sense in your sacrificing your life to save ours—"

"We'll have to handle it the way we planned, I guess," Matt Essley said heavily. The big man looked morose at the idea. Clay's eyes shuttled to Gar. The marshal's eyes were glittering, and Clay realized that he was facing a man who liked to kill.

"Why not let Gar do it all, Essley?" Clay asked cynically. "He'll enjoy it."

"Damn right I'll enjoy it!" Gar breathed. "I give you your chance to ride on, Texan. And now I'm damned glad you didn't!"

The callousness of the man turned Clay's stomach. Even Matt Essley looked a little pale. Preacher Hobart walked over and placed his arm around his daughter's shoulders, staring bravely at the killer. Cherry moved away from her father and faced Clay.

"Will you get my jacket, Clay? I'm—cold!"

Clay moved as if in a dream. He tried to tell himself that the whole thing was a horrible nightmare, and that any moment,

he'd wake up. But he knew that it wasn't. Gar's eyes were real. So was the gun in his hand. And so was the still figure of Buck Eades on the porch.

He bent over to pick up the little beaded jacket Cherry had worn. Halfway bent, he stopped—staring at something.

"Hurry up!" Gar said harshly. "We ain't got all day."

"You're right, marshal," Clay said. He was still bent over. "You don't have all day—you've got just a second more—"

He came up flinging the jacket straight at Matt Essley's horse. He flung the jacket with his left hand. His right hand held Buck Eades' gun; the gun Cherry had stuck in the pocket of her jacket.

He caught one glimpse of Marshal Gar's face before the gun blasted in his hand. Then Gar's face wasn't a face any more. It was a horrible mask of ripped flesh and blood. Clay swung the gun toward Essley. The big storekeeper fired. But his horse was still shying away from the flying jacket. The slug ripped along Clay's shoulder, as he pulled trigger himself.

Matt Essley jerked in the saddle and grabbed his side. He swore throatily and tried to get his gun up. Clay leaped forward and struck the gun from his hand.

"We need you, Matt," he said, "to tell the whole story in court."

Reaction set in then, and Clay slumped weakly on the porch steps. Cherry came over and slipped an arm around his shoulders.

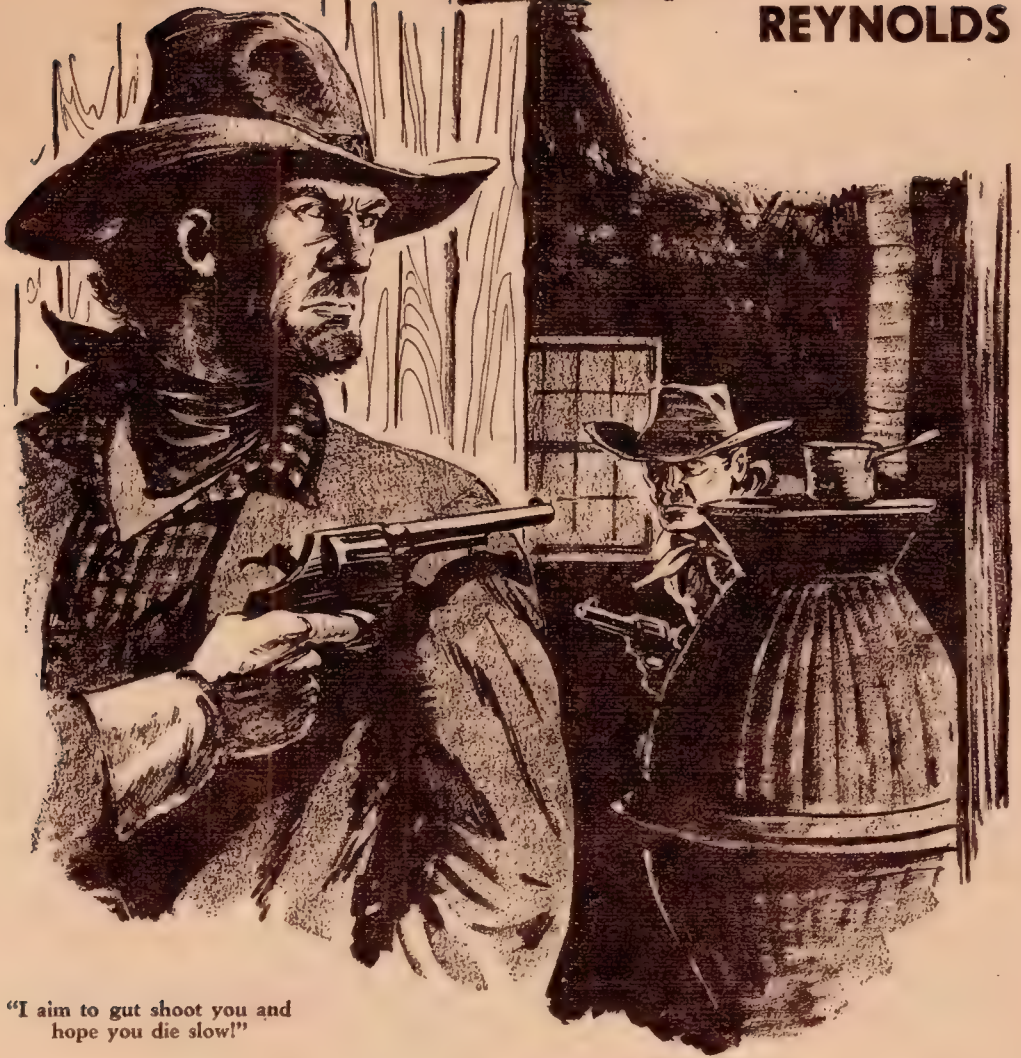
"The gun—in your jacket—you remembered—" he muttered. "But you shouldn't have taken the chance—you shouldn't take chances like that—"

"It isn't that kind of chance that scares a woman," she told him. "It's the chance that she might marry a man who doesn't really love her. That's the chance that scares a woman. And when you offered to die—to save dad and me—I knew I'd never have to take that chance—"

Clay looked at the girl, and then beyond her, to where Matt Essley was whining to Hobart that he'd never killed anyone; and that he'd return all the money he'd gotten—and that he didn't want to die on the gallows—and then he looked back at the girl.

One trail was ending. It hadn't been a happy trail. But a new trail was before him. One with a happy ending. ● ● ●

By W. J.
REYNOLDS



"I aim to gut shoot you and
hope you die slow!"

SHOOT-IT-OUT SHERIFF

TOM MAGRAM felt the wind of Kytell's bullet in the part of a second that he fired. Kytell shot again, but he was already moving backward and missed his last try. Magram saw his own second shot kick the dust from Kytell's vest, and he sent his third bullet within a few inches of the same spot. Kytell died as he fell against the rotting logs of the cabin.

It was a strange posse that pounded through those hills, for every man in it had a price on his head—and it was the lawman who was trying to escape!

Magram watched him until convinced that the bank robber wouldn't move again, then he turned his attention to Ray Magram who lay just inside the cabin door, breathing heavily.

Looking down at his brother, Tom Magram knew that the kid was dying. The bullet that Kytell had fired over an hour ago, had entered the boy's right breast and torn a terrible hole in his back.

Working with a blind hope, Tom Magram plugged the hole in Ray's back with the kid's shirt, and bound it in place with his belt. He used a piece of his own shirt to stop the small hole where the saddle-gun bullet had entered. Afterwards, he gave his brother whiskey from a bottle on the table, and bathed his face with cold water. Finally, Ray opened his eyes and regarded Tom blankly.

"I'll get you out to a doctor, Ray."

Ray's eyes changed, becoming apprehensive with returning awareness. His mouth moved and Magram spoke quickly, "Don't try to talk, kid."

"Tom! Tom, you here?" The effort at speech brought on a spasm of coughing, jerking the kid's body roughly, and bringing a bloody froth to his lips. Tom Magram bathed the foam away and Ray said again, "Tom? Kytell . . ."

"Kytell's dead, Ray. I shot him." He looked at his brother for a long moment, and the pale grayness of his eyes became dark with the run of his thoughts. For exactly three days, Ray Magram had been embarked upon his criminal life, and he was dying. Three days since Kytell's gang had robbed the Bitter Wells bank.

His hand was gentle upon the boy's face as he wiped at the blood again. "We'll have to get started, kid. It's a long way out of these hills."

Lucidity put a clearness in Ray's eyes, and he shook his head. "I know I'm dyin', Tom. Kytell . . . laughed at me. Said he was taking the money . . . selling out the gang."

His eyes flicked toward the bulging saddlebags on the table, and his breath was a heaving labor in his chest. Tom wiped at the froth, and Ray struggled to get his words out. "Others due, Tom. Buck Nelle . . . Short and Stoope, and . . . and Ringo. Get out . . . Tom, before they get . . . here." His fumbling hand crept toward Tom, and

the lean man reached quickly to press the limp fingers. "I . . . was a fool, Tom. Like you said, Kytell used . . . me . . . to get at you. . . ."

Later, Tom Magram buried his brother on the slope above the cabin, and there was efficient hurry about the big man now. The others of the gang were due here, and Buck Nelle, Short, Stoope and Ringo were men of dangerous caliber, formidable enough taken singly, but together . . .

And besides their natural viciousness, these men had one thing in common: a consuming hatred for Tom Magram.

He stood up, the job finished, and for a long minute, he stood looking down upon his brother's grave, a lean, hard man gaunted by hard work, his nut-brown face creased by the weather, and his eyes now holding a brooding hurt. Maybe, if he had taken more time to know Ray he could have prevented this. Ray had a high and fiery spirit, and words of command hadn't been enough.

Abruptly, Tom Magram wheeled away and strode rapidly toward the cabin.

He went in, retrieved the saddlebags from the table and took the time to look inside them. They were filled with packeted bills from the Bitter Wells Bank. Heaving them over his shoulder, he left the cabin and went swiftly toward the timber along the mountain brook a hundred yards from the cabin. He threw the saddlebags across his roan's saddle and mounted.

He hesitated then.

Southward, the way he had come in, was Hobiten, a small desert stop on the railroad, and he guessed about fifty miles off, thirty miles farther than the spot where he had cut the dim trail to this cabin. Northward lay Cantonment, another sixty miles, and forty miles this side of Bitter Wells. Chances were that the gang wouldn't be coming in from the Cantonment direction, but he might run into them going south where they must have swung in the same giant circle as he had from Bitter Wells.

Knowledge of these hills would stand him in good stead now, but this area had been well out of his bailiwick when he served as Bitter Wells' sheriff. The outlaws would suffer no such disadvantage: they knew the hills well.

Tom Magram rode north, letting the

roan pick its way up the shelving terrain toward the wedge of the pass that led out of this hole to the north. Clearing the timber at the lip of the pass, Magram stopped to look below toward the cabin. The high noon sun poured directly down, but even so, he could hardly make out the small structure.

As he looked, a horseman rode into the clear area in front of the cabin, and three others followed him closely. The distance was about half a mile, and in the clear air, Magram could see them in fair detail. The first horseman was the rakish, thin Buck Nelle, behind him was a squat fellow—Stoope—and beside Stoope was the lean, blond Short. Last was Ringo, fat-bellied and bearded.

Magram caught the tenseness in them, and saw the tilt of their faces as they looked up at him. Diminished by the distance, but clear and ringing, was Nelle's yell as he lifted a hand to point.

FOR another moment, Magram sat his roan looking down at them, knowing that he was recognized. His roan horse was his trademark, as famous as the cedar-butted Colt on his hip. Those four below had good reason to know them—both horse and gun. Tom Magram, sheriff of Bitter Wells. Tom Magram and his roan mare—and later the roan colt. For ten years the sound of the roan's hoofs in the night had set many an owlhooter splitting the breeze out of the country.

The four men below had all heard the sound of the roan, and two of them, Nelle and Stoope, had tasted the heat of Tom Magram's lead; all had been behind the stone walls of Yuma because of him. They wanted him *dead*. Ray Magram had been part of the plot to hurt him, to bring him off his ranch into these hills for a final settlement. Ray's own boyish desire to stand alone had made him an easy mark for them.

Ray was dead now, and the reason for Tom Magram's grueling labor, to get money to send Ray to medical college, was dead too. Kytell was dead with all his cunning and his hatred for the Magram name.

But Buck Nelle was alive. Stoope, Short and Ringo were alive, and the four sat their horses below and hated Tom Magram with

a killing hate. To heat that hate, Tom Magram had twenty thousand dollars on his saddle that they had taken from the Bitter Wells Bank.

Tom Magram urged the roan onward into the pass, and again he heard Nelle's ringing yell, furious and vicious, and on its heels came the distance running of their horses. But Tom Magram did not push the roan. There was the steep climb to slow them up, and their horses had been ridden since morning likely, as his had been. Speed would not count so much in the miles ahead, but cunning and ability—and knowledge of the country. They had that and he did not.

Nelle was no fool. He would realize his advantage after the first heat of rage.

Magram let the roan pick a steady trot through the pass' jumbled floor, the fallen boulders, the maze of debris from countless snows. Nelle wouldn't crowd him in this jumble of cover; he would know Magram's ability with a saddle gun and the Colt revolver.

Once through, Magram let the roan move out a little down the spreading apron of the pass, angling a little to the left to attain the cover of the timber along the spiny ridge on his left. On beyond him, the apron became the beginning of a shallow canyon that dropped away into the rugged distance, its floor bright green with the willow along the small stream, and the hemming piñon covering the ridges that closed it in. The canyon led in his direction, and offered a route of fast travel with the protection of the timber.

A high crackle brought Magram's attention back to the pass. The four outlaws had emerged from it upon the apron and a puff of smoke floating away explained the noise of the bullet's passing. As he looked, Stoope lifted his rifle again, and this time he fired six times, rapidly, the bullets whipping dangerously close to Magram.

It was fine shooting, considering the distance and the steep grade. Magram urged the roan into the timber along the base of the canyon's slanting wall. They couldn't have hoped to hit him at that range, so the shooting could have only one purpose.

With the thought, Magram put the roan into a run and went crashing down the canyon at a high pace. They wanted him

to stampede! His desire to maintain his lead would send him steadily forward down the canyon—that would be Nelle's idea.

Nelle would know Magram was too experienced to turn aside into the jumble of mountains to be hemmed in a pocket and killed. It meant to Magram that Nelle wanted him to go down that canyon. It meant further, that up ahead there was an ambush spot, and somewhere along here was a place where part of them could cut aside to come out ahead later. Magram went crashing away to allow Nelle to think he had fallen for it.

When their noise began to fall behind, Magram slowed his roan. He carefully maintained a bare lead, using all his caution to make his progress as silent as possible. A half-hour later, his straining ears caught a faint and muffled sound. He pulled in quickly to study that sound.

After a bit he decided the whisper of noise came from beyond the ridge on his left. Retracing in his memory, he recalled the gash of a canyon that bisected this one a quarter of a mile back. At least three horses there. One had been left to keep Magram moving.

Ringo, likely; because of his weight his horse would be closest to exhaustion.

Magram loosened the cinch and slipped the bridle so the roan could graze, while he chewed jerky and cold flapjack saved from his morning meal. After half an hour with no sound from Ringo, Magram took his saddle-gun, and started a cautious stalk of the fat gunman.

He was shortly at a narrow bend in the canyon where the brook hugged the outside bend, and the bend formed an eddy of debris and gullied soil that, brush grown, formed excellent cover. He decided that Ringo would have his stand just beyond, in case Magram did try to double back.

Stealthily, Magram eased into the gullied area, and once he heard the snort of Ringo's horse beyond in the timber. He moved on, and shortly he caught the subdued grunts of a man working at some chore. Then, over the lip of a gully, he glimpsed Ringo moving toward the gullied area with an armload of dead branches. *Firing to make a bonfire as a signal*, Magram thought.

The thought brought a relief to Magram. It meant that Nelle was too far away to hear a gunshot, and fire and smoke would

be his signal to come running. Magram moved on, working through the gullies, and after five minutes he realized there was no more noise from Ringo. So he waited, unmoving.

After another five minutes, he was convinced that Ringo had detected his presence somehow. He moved faster then and shifted his position as much as he could by slipping toward the other side of the canyon in a lateral gully. When Magram eased up out of the gully and rounded a clump of brush, there, twenty feet away, was Ringo.

THE fat outlaw held a gun in one hand, slanted toward where Magram had made his betraying sound. In the other hand, Ringo held a match and was bending a little, reaching for his boot sole. Beside him a pile of grass and brush lay ready for the match, ready to send its column of smoke into the air.

Magram knew that in like circumstances he would be shot instantly, and he knew that now was no time for heroics. He wondered at himself as he stepped out and said, "Ringo!"—and fired.

The word ended on violent action as Ringo leaped, trying to whirl and bring his gun in line with Magram. Ringo fired as the saddle-gun made a second sharp report, and Ringo was wheeling into a hard fall, his own bullet making a high sound as it whizzed away through the willows.

He grunted there, trying to rise, eyes staring from his shaggy face; then he lay back almost gently, and Magram wheeled away. He went rapidly now, scrambling into and out of the gullies, and then ran, heels hitting solidly, back toward his horse.

Time was important now, and each minute saved was time gained. Once ahead, Nelle might not wait for Magram, knowing the former sheriff, but strike back up the canyon to meet him. In that case Magram would not have two hours before his ruse was discovered.

Fifteen minutes later, he was passing Ringo's body again, and he pushed the roan into a steady gait for the pass. On the upper slope he turned and studied the canyon and flanking ridges. There was no sign or movement of the outlaws. Then he moved on again into the gloom of the pass.

When Magram emerged into the enormous hole again, the cabin below was hidden

in the shadows, but the peaks were still colored by the westering sun. He worked down the rise to the floor of the hole and out on the dim southward trail toward Hobiten. He could retrace his trail of this morning for twenty miles, but from that point on he would have to guess at the little desert town's location.

From there, he could get the train to Bitter Wells. His real worry was Nelle's superior knowledge of these mountains, and that the rakish outlaw would read his aim from the roan's tracks.

Magram rode into Hobiten at mid-morning on his dead-beat roan. He had given the animal a rest at midnight, freeing him of the saddle and letting him graze until four. But Magram himself had had no sleep. The caliber of the men after him forbade any relaxation, even for a minute, and there was the added danger of his own exhausted condition.

He could easily have slept on for hours. And he showed the strain; his brown cheeks were drawn and his eyes hollow and red-rimmed; they felt as though they were filled with sand. He had the small comfort of knowing that Nelle and his men were little better off.

At the edge of town he halted and, winking his gritty eyes, studied his back trail long and searchingly, until the five miles of foothills and desert became a blur. But he saw nothing. He wondered again if the movements he had seen twice this morning had really been movements—or a trick of his blurred vision.

Then he rode on again, skirting the scattered dwellings. He headed for a large building at the end of the short street: a sign proclaimed it to be a livery. Beyond the livery were a half dozen stores and a sand-scoured hotel hovering over them. Setting alone a hundred yards farther on was the yellow depot with a loading platform at one end and a stock corral beside the tracks.

He swung down in the wide livery doors. As a rail-thin man dropped a manure fork to approach him, Magram said, "When's the next train toward Bitter Wells?"

"Twelve thirty-two," the hostler said. "She'll be right there, too!"

"Twelve-thirty. Three hours yet."

"That's right . . . Say! You're Tom Magram! Saw you once over to Bitter

Wells the time you backed the mob down from hangin' Larry Donovan!" The liveryman bent forward eagerly, voice becoming intimate with the great, making himself a close friend of Tom Magram.

Magram's lips tightened over the words he was about to speak. The less this man knew the better—unless it was wrong. He tossed him a gold eagle. "Take care of my horse, rubdown, feed, hay. I'm going to the hotel for forty winks till traintime. The rest of that eagle is yours for coming on the high lope if you see any stranger ride into town."

"Sure, Tom, sure thing. Depend on me, I'll come a-hoppin', you bet!" The coin disappeared into his overalls.

Magram took the saddlebags and moved on down the street toward the hotel, but when the buildings shut the liveryman from his sight, he went on around the hotel, and walked rapidly toward the depot.

The depot was little more than a single room, long and narrow. A waiting-room with long wooden benches made up one end; the other end was for freight storage; and the agent's railed-off office took up most of the middle and served as a partition. A potbellied stove sat in the center of the building, heating the waiting-room and the agent's cubbyhole during the winter.

A shirt-sleeved agent nodded to him as he entered and Magram said, "A ticket to Bitter Wells." He watched the agent punch and stamp the ticket; then he counted out the dollar and a half that it cost.

"You look tuckered," the agent said. "Help yourself to a bench. I'll call you when the train comes in." He looked at Magram closely. "I've seen you before. Live around here?"

"Bitter Wells," Magram said. "Used to be sheriff over there."

"Sure. *Magram*. Guess you're a member of the posse after them robbers, eh?"

"Partly," Magram said. "Only the robbers are after me. I'd appreciate it if you'd let out a holler soon as any riders come into town." He went to the bench and stretched out, using the bags as a pillow. He did not miss the agent's paling face.

"I—you reckon they'll come here?" The agent's voice shook a little.

"I wouldn't be surprised." Tom Magram said and slept.

HE CAME awake into a dead silence that was broken after a moment by the clatter of the telegraph instrument. But that sound had not awakened him; the chatter of the key had run through his sleep. Something else . . .

The furtive whisper of footsteps brought Magram up, his revolver in his hand. A silent step and a glance out the window showed him the agent on tiptoes, easing away from the depot. Even as he looked the man settled back on his heels and took off for town.

Then Magram saw the reason for the agent's stampede.

He saw the three head-hung horses upstreet from the hotel. Nearer the building, Buck Nelle leaned against a store. Down the street on the opposite side from Nelle, Stoope stood with his rifle cradled in his arms. A searching glance showed him Short behind the hotel, but well concealed, except for his flop hat.

Then Magram's curse was a soft sound as he saw the thin liveryman run from the hotel and stop before Buck Nelle. At least he had been right about the liveryman: another gold piece from Buck Nelle and he had sold Magram out. A glance at the depot clock showed him the time. Twelve ten.

He saw the liveryman waving his arms earnestly. *Scared half to death*, Magram thought. He was having to tell Nelle that Magram wasn't in the hotel. The rakish outlaw might believe it—and he might just put a bullet in the thin man for his trouble.

Magram holstered his revolver and picked up his saddle-gun and jacked in a shell. It wouldn't take Nelle long to figure where Magram was, and he'd come on the jump.

There was no point in running. The depot offered as good a place as any for a showdown fight. He was in a tight spot, and blood was on the moon.

The liveryman suddenly backed away from Nelle, crabbing off in fear. But Buck Nelle wasn't looking at the townsman now: he was looking toward the depot. Suddenly he straightened, and made a violent motion with his arm.

Nelle knew where Magram was.

Through the heated silence of noon, the train's whistle cut faint but clear. Nelle

jumped and faded behind the hotel, and his yell was ringing and rage-filled. Stoope was wheeling to face the depot, his rifle half-lifted when Magram notched his squat figure in his sights and fired.

Nelle yelled again, and Short was a lean shape as he charged for the hotel's back door. Magram fired and a tin can spun behind Short. Then Magram held his fire rather than shoot into the hotel. He swung back to Stoope but saw the man completing his roll in the dust. No more trouble there!

Shouts lifted from several quarters now, as the townsmen became aware of the fight on hand. But Magram knew that the citizens would be of little use to him. Most of them wouldn't know what it was about, or who to side with until it was over.

It was Tom Magram's fight, and the whistle of the train would send Buck Nelle into quick action.

Magram waited, letting Nelle make his move. It was quickly forthcoming. Suddenly a rider shot around the west side of the hotel and another around the east side, both charging down upon the depot, offering a split target. Nelle's ringing yell lifted and Short's savage cry. Magram's rifle came up, then he grunted a curse as both riders slid to the off side of their horses, offering him no target but a leg hooked over the cantle.

The rifle followed the bay horse from the hotel's hitch rack, then lifted to the leg. Magram fired three times before the rider sprawled off the running horse. Short.

He swung the rifle to Nelle as the rakish outlaw fired, the bullet splintering into the window frame near his head. Magram's own shot missed; then he was forced to duck as Short cut loose with a barrage from his prone position, one of the bullets laying a hot line across Magram's back.

Then he turned his gun back to Short and fired twice more and saw the blond outlaw die there in the dust.

Before Magram could fire at Nelle, the thin outlaw left the saddle in a long dive that carried him behind the platform at the far end of the depot. His horse raced on beyond the tracks.

Magram dropped the rifle and drew his revolver, running lightly to the other side of the building. He made the window there, as Nelle raced along the platform to the

end of the depot, flattening against the wall. Magram stopped and retreated back to the potbellied stove near the center of the room.

Beyond the station, the whistle of the train was closer, and the racket of the wheels was a growing hum.

It was Nelle's move again, Magram thought. He could wait, and the little outlaw could not. Trouble was, the man might not mind dying if he could take Magram along to hell for company . . .

Magram put the stove between himself and the open freight door, and held his gun poised. It was the only place by which Nelle could enter besides the door at the opposite end, and he'd never make it *that* far without exposing himself.

"Better get at it, Nelle," Magram said. "The liveryman will be yelling his head off about now, and so will the agent. A few reward-hungry citizen will be plugging at you in a minute!"

On the heels of a brief silence, Nelle's furious voice snarled at him, "Damn you, Magram! I've sworn to kill you for ten years. But I waited to drag that smart aleck kid brother of yours into this. I hoped he'd rot in the pen! Now I aim to gut shoot you and hope you die slow!"

Magram knew the hard and bitter fury of the little man, the hellish temper when aroused. He said, "Hear the townsfolk yell, Nelle? They can already taste the

whiskey that reward money will buy! Too bad you won't be able to enjoy a drink."

He heard Nelle's choked curse and saw the flash of his rakish body as he dived through the freight door, and rolled like a cat. Magram fired but knew he had missed—and knew also, that Nelle had counted on that, risking it to get at Magram. Nelle's gun blasted as he came to his feet.

The bullet whanged off the stove, and the second bullet, on the heels of the first, knocked a chunk of cast iron clanging to the floor. Nelle hadn't counted on the stove.

Magram fired twice, then twice more.

Nelle's gun still blasted, but the lean outlaw was moving back under Magram's lead, and the rakish body was loosening, sagging. Then Nelle was down, and inarticulate sounds came from his lips until they bloomed with blood as he went limp upon the floor.

Magram stood leaning heavily upon the stove, a drugged weariness pressing upon him. His eyes burned from the powder smoke. He dragged leaden feet toward the saddlebags as the blast of the locomotive's whistle came suddenly close.

He picked up the saddlebags. Through the window toward town, he could see the alarmed and excited citizens in a crowd beside the hotel, waving their arms, and yelling. Magram grunted and walked out to board the train. ● ● ●



Wade Bayliss was too busy fighting to save his ranch and his life to think of Ruth Ysabel. So that luscious-lipped blonde made her own offer: Marry me tomorrow—or hang tonight!

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**STAR
WESTERN**

Five Apache warriors had gone
down before his rifle this after-
noon. . . .

By **WILLIAM
L. JACKSON**



THE CORPORAL'S PRIVATE MASSACRE

*Only Corporal Masnick remembered
his treachery in Devil's Canyon. And
that was one man too many!*

THE close-in rattle of carbine fire and the yells of fighting men were sounds which put a constant pressure upon the ears and nerve fibers; but the soft and futile noises of men wounded and dying were worse to hear. The racket of the battle was closely confined by the walls of Devil's Canyon, and there was comfort for a soldier only in the sound of his own weapon discharging and the knowledge

that he must be alive if he was still firing.

It was a dug-in fight, and this meant that things could not be going well for the cavalry. The Indians in the canyon were Apaches, mobile wraithlike fighters who fired and ran and offered no target. Cavalry was designed to meet mobility with mobility, and when the white soldiers were forced to give up mounted pursuit for this rock-to-rock combat all advantages lay with the Apaches.

Knowledge of this fact had lain hard and cold in the minds of D Troop's officers since the ambush in Devil's Canyon had given them the fight they had been marching to find, and it had filtered quickly through the ranks. The enlisted men's thoughts had been perfectly expressed by Corporal Roy Masnick, who hadn't realized—in the heat of battle—that he was shouting:

"Move us! For God's sake, *move* us. Take the losses and get us out of this. Let C Troop find us running, but let them find us alive!"

No recruit was Masnick, but a soldier with ten years of frontier service behind him. Santee Sioux, Cheyenne, and Pawnee had fallen before his rifle, and this afternoon five Apache warriors had gone down before it, one so close that his flailing arms had momentarily torn the carbine from Masnick's grasp.

The men who would fight no more this afternoon were not the first Masnick had seen fall beside him, but never before had there been such a screaming fear within him. Somewhere on one of the long dry marches, in the heat of some dimly remembered battle, or during one of the long desert nights, something inside him had passed the breaking point.

There is a saturation point for every man, and Masnick's had been reached.

Even before the start of this latest march into Apache territory he had begun to draw more and more into himself, and he had cast off friends as a drowning man might cast off any weight lessening his chances of survival. He had badgered military inferiors and been so sullen to superiors that there was only one man left in the troop whom he could count as his friend.

This was John Goodnight, a thirty-year-old private who had come west from Ohio at almost the same time as Masnick. Good-

night and Masnick had been in the troop longer than any other enlisted men, and they knew each other better than brothers.

Yet sometime during this hopeless battle staged by D Troop while they waited for support from the fort even Goodnight entered into Masnick's unconscious calculations for survival. Sometime during the battle, as surely as if he had read it in the coppery sky, Masnick knew he was going to leave Devil's Canyon alive, if no other man in D Troop made it.

He was going to hear the bugle which would announce the arrival of C Troop from the fort, and when he fell back he was going to close his eyes and ears to any man who could not stand on his own legs.

Half an hour later, when he was fingering the last five rounds left for his rifle, he heard the distant bell-like sweetness of C Troop's horn, and in another moment he heard a lieutenant shout, "D Troop mount! Sound men help the injured. We're going out, and we're taking the wounded with us!"

Masnick heard this and was glad, but he knew that battles were not ended when a lieutenant shouted hopeful words. He knew Apaches, and he knew that one more ruthless attack would come as the Cavalry fell back. One more rush was due, one more slashing onslaught before the rifles of C Troop could come into range.

Masnick saw strong arms catch up wounded men near him, and he saw Apaches long hidden in the rocks suddenly come into view. He saw the backs of troopers aiding the injured turned upon him, and he saw a few brave men stand upright in the rocks and lay down a fire to break up the blood-seeking Apache rush. Then he saw Goodnight go down not fifteen feet from him.

One of Goodnight's legs twisted beneath him, and his high, strong cheeks went white with pain. "Roy," he called, "give me a hand. I've caught one."

MASNICK said nothing. He only shook his head and glanced toward the howling, advancing line of Apaches. As if it might somehow help Goodnight, he fired a final shot in their direction before he broke and ran.

He ran until the Apache yells were faint

behind him and he had the reins of a fidgeting mount in his hands. As he hit the saddle, he looked back over his shoulder, but he could not see the spot where Goodnight lay.

He joined a straggling line of horses and men, and he watched C Troop stream to the mouth of the canyon and stop there in the face of the Apache fire from within. He had time to look closely at the column of survivors of the ambush as C Troop was turned back from the rescue of any wounded.

As he took in the sight of these bone-tired and battle-marked troopers he muttered, "We'd both have had it if I'd stayed." Still, somewhere deep within him, the silent shame was beginning.

He thought it was over and done with after the retreat ended and there was some semblance of organization once more, but he soon found that it was not. He did not hear Goodnight's name in the list of men found dead in the canyon, but he did hear a swearing Sergeant say, "They carried off some of the wounded, God help 'em. I hope they turn up like some of the boys did after our first brush with Geronimo!"

Masnick nodded silently, and only now did he realize that there was this possibility. It was only the faintest of chances, but it was enough to generate a new sort of anxiety which began working on him even before he reached the fort with the badly-mauled remnant of D Troop.

In the following days he thought more and more of the chance that Goodnight might be alive, and within a week he had started to lose sleep over it. In less than a month men in his barracks twice woke him from nightmares, and once he woke by himself, cold and afraid after a dream about a gaunt and limping soldier who pursued him through an endless forest of feathered lances.

As replacements flowed into the fort from the East and strength was built up for an attack to avenge the losses suffered in Devil's Canyon the spirits of every man in garrison rose—every man but Masnick. Men who knew him well talked about his gray-faced worrying, and every man in D Troop became aware of his interest in any story of a brave man's escape from Indians.

But they offered him only sympathy, for they knew of his friendship with John

Goodnight, and they thought he was hopping against hope that Goodnight was still alive. Not even these men who lived and worked with him ever dreamed that his thoughts lay in the opposite direction.

The reported strength of the Indians was also increasing, and scouts and friendly Indians brought in rumors that old tribal enemies were coming together to join forces against the yellow-legs. Scouts left the fort and did not return, and in the middle of one long and silent night the fort was aroused when some pair of reeking Apache hands threw over the stockade a bag containing the head of a chief who had made peace with the white man.

Then from a fort to the north came news that the Indians had expressed their contempt with a new gesture. Seven men they had captured were released as evidence of the red man's strength.

"Use these men," they said, "for the white man is small in numbers where the red man is large. We will meet in battle again and these seven yellow-legs will supply more scalps to be hung from Apache lodge poles."

The day after this news arrived D Troop fell in with the largest force ever gathered on the fort's parade. Farewells were given and last letters left with friends. The minds of soldiers turned to old friendships and the battle at the end of this march, but Masnick shared none of this nostalgia and anticipation. As he sat his horse in ranks there was room for but one thought in his mind.

Was John Goodnight one of the released prisoners?

The land lay still before them in a monotonous pattern which joined forces with the sun to deaden their minds and numb their senses. All day the first day they traveled without seeing so much as a pony track. The very stillness of the land about them carried a silent threat from Apaches they could not see.

Scouts grew nervous and officers reviewed tactics, while every man in the great weaving column held himself braced for the first whoop or shot.

They joined forces with the column from the other fort that night, and they laid their camp in a bowl-like bit of terrain chosen for defense rather than comfort. No fires were allowed, though they realized

that every Indian within a hundred miles knew they were here. Sentries were posted, and scouts drifted away into the darkness.

One scout failed to return, then another, before at last one man stumbled in, with the life half gone from him and a feathered shaft through him from chest to shoulder blade. He fell and was propped up by the arrow in his body, and he would let no one touch it.

"When that's pulled out, I'm through," he said, "and don't you think different." A fighting light brightened his dulled and weary eyes. "And, Captain, I can't go like that," he said to D Troop's commander, "for if I last till dawn I'll see something which will make it almost worth it."

He strained to lift himself, as if what he had to say was worth his pain. "I saw them, Captain," he said. "I located their main party not five miles away and walked right among them. I saw hundreds of them, Captain, and most of them are carrying lances and bows. I didn't see more than fifty rifles in the party. When they hit your line with that, it's going to be like throwing water against a rock."

The scout put a hand to the wound in his chest, as if the pain was getting him again. "Captain, my guess is that they think they'll have strong medicine with them if they can catch you on foot like they did in Devil's Canyon, but this time you'll have the advantage if you fight dismounted and concentrate your weapons. They'll hit the center of this camp at dawn if you're still here, and they'll send in the braves with rifles first. You wipe out that first bunch, and they'll be licked."

With his story told the scout closed his eyes, and the pain he had ignored until now rushed in to whiten his cheeks. "Just put me where I can see it, Captain," he said. "Just let me watch!"

RAPID orders were given. Rifle pits were dug in the darkness, and the strength of the cavalry was placed in a hard core to meet the attack. A defense of three rows of rifles was set up, and throughout the night flank guards were closed in and held on the alert.

Masnick could roughly judge what was going on by the movement of troops about him in the night, and he welcomed an order

which sent him to an outer edge of the camp with three other men to strengthen a point away from the spot where he guessed the attack was expected.

He helped dig a rifle pit in the rocky soil, and he settled into this depression with the other two men to wait for the night to pass. He watched the first gray streaks hinting of the dawn appear in the sky, and the first swellings of fear began again.

And now, groping and stumbling in the pre-dawn darkness, two men came up from the main body of the camp. "Two more rifles for this position," one of them said. "The captain's sure they'll hit the center, but there may be some lively overflow in this direction."

The second newcomer swore as he struck his chin on a rock, and Masnick felt the flesh crawl along his spine. He held his carbine tighter and turned his head. "Goodnight!" he said.

A familiar-sounding voice said, "Yeah, who's that?"

Masnick did not reply. He felt sweat greasing his face and running into his eyes. "Who's that?" the familiar voice said again, and Masnick's head swung about. He strained to see the face a few feet from him in the lessening darkness, and he was sure that he saw John Goodnight.

"John," he said, "I thought we'd both get it if I stayed. I shouldn't have left. I shouldn't . . ." Easing away, he stood up, the threat of Apaches forgotten in the face of this new fear.

From nearby in the fading darkness came the flat and deadly twang of a bow-string, and an arrow directed by a savage eye which needed little light to see entered Masnick's throat with hardly a sound. One of the other D Troop men in the rifle pit swore bitterly and pulled Masnick to the ground.

Another D Troop man had his quick look at Masnick's wound and said, "Forget it. He's dead. It broke his neck."

With Masnick's blood staining the ground at their feet, the four men in the rifle pit swung their carbines about to cover the pre-dawn mass which would be revealed as a screening thicket of brush in a matter of minutes. To no one in particular, one of the D Troop men said, "What got into him?"

(Continued on page 113)



All a gun ever got a man was holes in his carcass. . . .

GUNMAN'S WELCOME

Tired of a gun-hand's life, all Bill Taylor wanted was to get home, hang up his holsters, and live like other men. But he found that other men didn't want to live like him!

By A. C. ABBOTT

BILL TAYLOR stalked into the Lucky Dollar like a man on the war path. He ordered a drink, cuffed his hat to the back of his blond head, and reached angrily for tobacco.

Then he saw big, dark-faced Ash Rankin sauntering toward him, looking prosperous, as Bill had heard he was. Bill swung away from the bar, his gray eyes stormy, his lanky frame needled under the insolence of Rankin's stare. He had never liked the man.

"So the celebrated Bill Taylor has come

home," Rankin drawled, his white teeth gleaming in his smooth shaven face. "Heard you were comin'. But where's the famous gun?"

"You're the second man that's asked that," Bill snapped heatedly. "The first time I was polite. This time I don't mind sayin' it's none of your damn' business!"

Rankin laughed mockingly. "Too bad you made the long trip," he said dryly, "for nothin'. I've got an option to buy your dad's Flyin' T, so there was no reason for you to come back."

The cold shock of that statement served to quiet Bill's raging mood. Hot temper still flared in his eyes, but his lean face turned stony and he spoke slowly. "I don't believe that."

"Wouldn't call me a liar, would you?" Rankin asked with quiet menace. He took a step forward, his big body rigid.

A warning bell clanged in the back of Bill's brain. He'd heard a lot about Ash Rankin in the half hour he'd been back in Three Forks. Now, clamping a strangle hold on his rebellious temper, he grinned, tight-lipped.

"Be foolish of me, wouldn't it?" he murmured. "When you're packin' a gun an' I'm not!"

Rankin ignored the sarcastic remark. "I'm gonna buy the Flyin' T," he said forcefully. "Your dad's whipped, just like the rest of these two-bit ranchers. He's pullin' out, and you'd better not try to stop him!"

"I haven't seen my dad for two years or heard from him for six months," Bill said. He was cool now, and he wasn't afraid of this man, gun or no gun. "But, if I remember him right, he's not whipped."

"Are you—?"

"Yeah," Bill drawled deliberately, "I reckon I am—callin' you a damn liar!"

Rankin's hand slapped his gun.

"Take your hand off that gun," Bill drawled, his voice like flint, "and I'll beat the hell out of you. That's my dad you're talkin' about."

Slowly Rankin fought down the rage that gripped him. He straightened against the bar, carefully adjusted his coat.

"I wouldn't soil my hands on you, sonny," he said, his dark eyes glittering. "But the next time we meet you better be packin' a gun—or get out of the country with your

old man. We don't need any worn-out gun-fighters around here!"

With deceptive casualness Bill drained his glass, set it back on the bar. "I put that gun away, Rankin," he said then, coolly, "but not so far away I can't get it out again. And get this—I come home to stay. It'll take a damn sight bigger beller than you can raise to change my mind for me!"

He eyed the man coldly for a long moment before he turned his back and strode out of the saloon.

Bill paused on the boardwalk to roll a cigarette, letting his brooding glance slide over the wide dusty street of Three Forks. The town had not changed much in the two years he'd been gone, but the people apparently had.

He swore under his breath as he thought of his interview with old Ike Walters, owner of the livery stable. Walters had taken it for granted that Bill would be gunning for Ash Rankin. Why? Even if Rankin had killed the owner of the Crow Track in order to buy the spread, even if he was using ruthless methods of expansion, what business was it of Bill's?

Hell! He had come home to settle down, not to kill a man.

Besides, Ike Walters had offered no proof that Rankin was guilty of these crimes. Just rumor.

If Walters was so damn anxious to have Rankin killed, let him do it himself.

Unless Bill got proof that either he or his dad was directly involved with Rankin, he was going to leave his gun where it was. Even if Ike Walters did think he'd lost his nerve!

Now, forgetting about of eating in town, Bill turned toward the stable. He would ride on out to the Flying T and find out from old Ed Taylor just what the hell was going on around here.

He had just passed Hobson's Mercantile and was stepping off the walk to cross to the stable when a glad cry halted him.

"Bill!"

Slowly Bill turned, magnetically drawn by the sound of that musical voice. Peggy Doolin! One of the reasons he had come home. He had thought of her often in the past two years, but he was not prepared for the sight of her swinging toward him now.

"Bill!" she said again, extending her hand eagerly. "I'm so glad you're home."

How clearly Bill remembered her shining red gold hair and her laughing blue eyes! He remembered now to take his hat off while a delighted grin spread over his lean face.

"Gosh, Peggy," he blurted, "you couldn't be as glad as I am." He darted a glance at her left hand. No ring!

"We've been waiting for you," Peggy said frankly. "Your dad said you were coming. Have you seen him yet?"

As she asked that question, a look of apprehension crossed her sunny face, making Bill wonder momentarily.

"I'm on my way out there now," he replied, unable to keep his mind on his father. "Do you reckon we can take up where we left off?"

"Maybe," she said with a bright smile, "although I'm not taking up with anyone till my dad is out of trouble."

"Your dad, too, huh?"

"Everybody." She shrugged impatiently. "We're on bedrock, can't hold out much longer. Rankin—"

"Can you prove anythin' against Rankin?" Bill cut in, annoyance rising in him again. Did she think he was gunning for Rankin, too?

"We don't need to prove what we know, Bill," she replied steadily. "We're about broke and the only offer we have is from Rankin. Chicken feed!"

Her glance dropped unconsciously to his gun-bare waist and then whipped up to his face, startled.

"Yeah, I know," Bill said with weary sarcasm, "where's my famous gun? Well, it's in the saddle bag, dammit, and it's goin' to stay there!"

"Bill, I didn't mean . . ." she began hastily. She hesitated, and then finished lamely, "Only it's not very safe around here any more without one. Funny things going on, cowboy."

"So I've heard," Bill commented dryly, studying her face with hungry eyes. "But I reckon we can straighten it out some way without a gun."

HE WANTED to tell her about the change in him, but would she, too, think he had lost his nerve? It was just that he'd just spent too much time in

hospitals lately with nothing to do but think. That's all a gun ever got a man—holes in his carcass. Then some day there'd be a hole in a place that wouldn't heal.

When Bill had been released from that last hospital, he had put his gun away, dropped his father a short note and come home to settle down on the old Flying T. Maybe with Peggy Doolin . . .

He looked at her now, wondering if he should try to tell her. Then he shrugged the thought away. You couldn't tell a girl like this how it felt to face flaming guns, to have slugs tearing through you, to lie for endless weeks with nothing but pain for company.

Instead he said, "I'm through fightin', Peggy. Plumb peaceable from here on. I come home to settle down, maybe raise a family." He grinned, but he got no response from her.

"There's a lot to be done around here," she said slowly, "before anyone can settle down."

"You've got low, haven't you?" Bill asked mildly.

"Yes," she snapped, "and it's all on Rankin's side! Bill, what's happened to you?"

Bill, feeling his anger rising again, took a deep breath and held it till his lungs ached. He and Peggy had always scrapped, but he had thought now it would be different.

"Ike Walters was tellin' me that Rankin's goin' whole hog," he said, trying to sound casual. "Shovin' four ways from the middle."

"He is," Peggy asserted. "We thought you'd be—"

"Hell!" Bill exploded, his temper flaring again. "Can't a man do somethin' besides shoot for once? Can't you see how it is, Peggy?"

"Yes, I guess I can," she answered, her voice cold. "Your dad said you shouldn't come back. I'm beginning to think he was right. There's no home around here for a man who won't fight!"

She turned her back on him, but stopped to say over her shoulder, "You'll find your dad over at Ma Whitley's place." Then she was gone.

Bill stared after her a moment, fighting his thoughts. What was his dad doing over

at Ma Whitley's? Why wasn't he out at the ranch? What the hell was the *matter* with everybody?

There was law in the country. If they could prove anything against Rankin, they could take care of him legally. Did they think that he, Bill Taylor, had crawled out of his last bloody bed just to come home and kill a man for them? Hell!

He turned back up the street, angling across it toward the little white house inside its picket fence where Peggy had said he'd find his father.

He let himself through the squeaky gate, hesitated a moment on the porch while he fought down his bitter thoughts. Then he knocked. A gruff voice that Bill recognized bade him come in, and Bill shoved through the door with a fast-beating heart. His dad would soon straighten this thing out.

The interior of the thickly furnished room was dark, and it was a moment before Bill could see the figure sitting in a deep rocker by a far window. He crossed the room slowly, his spurs clanking, his heart choking him. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed this stalwart old dad of his.

Ed Taylor looked a little thinner, a little gruffer, but the level gray eyes in the deeply seamed face were as clear as ever.

"Howdy, son," old Ed said, and he smiled, but it was not the grin of welcome Bill had expected.

"Howdy, Dad," Bill replied in a choking voice he hardly recognized.

He extended his hand eagerly, expecting his father to rise. But Ed Taylor did not get out of his chair. He lifted a gnarled hand to grip Bill's firmly, while his eyes ran over his son with open pride.

Bill squatted on his spurs, cowboy fashion, and rolled a cigarette. "How come you're not out at the ranch, Dad?"

"Too much work for an old man," Ed replied easily, his glance steady on Bill's face. "I'm sellin' out to Rankin as soon as the boys get a count on the cattle."

"Hell you are!" Bill's fingers continued with the cigarette, but his mind stopped cold. His dad really was selling the Flying T without even discussing it with the son he knew was coming home!

"Rankin told me that," Bill said narrowly, "and I called him a liar."

Ed's eyes narrowed swiftly, an expression Bill well remembered. "Then you better apologize, I reckon," he said gruffly. "I give him an option on the place."

"Why, Dad? Dammit, you knew I was comin' home. Why didn't you wait?" Bill tried to keep his voice level, but he was hurt and he showed it.

"This is no country for a young feller," Ed explained impatiently. "That's why I'm sellin'. This country is all played out. I'm goin' to give you the money for the ranch, and you can go somewhere into a new country and start a ranch of your own. This country's no good for a young feller."

"Dad, what's happened?" Bill was completely bewildered. He and his dad had always planned to run the Flying T together as soon as Bill got the drifter's itch out of his blood.

"Nothin's happened," Ed said irritably. "Hell! Can't a man sell his own ranch if he wants to? I'm too old for that kinda stuff. This chair just fits me."

Bill, looking at his father through narrowed lids, wondered if the old man was ashamed of him. He *had* been wild.

"If this place is sold, then let's go together, Dad," he suggested. "Buy another place. I can run it while you ride a chair. We can—"

"No," Ed interrupted bluntly. "I'm stayin' here."

"Gosh, Dad," Bill murmured, feeling for words that would reach this man, "I thought . . . Isn't there anythin' I can do?"

"Best thing you can do," Ed said curtly, "is to go back where you come from. I don't need you here. I'll give you the money."

Bill wadded the unlighted cigarette and slammed it into a corner. "You can keep the money," he bit out, shocked at the coldness of his own voice. "I can start my own ranch without it." He hesitated, but his father made no rejoinder. "Reckon I might as well pull out, huh?"

"Reckon so. There's nothin' to keep you here."

"No," Bill agreed harshly, "I guess there isn't."

He straightened up, his eyes flaming. "Hellfire!" he breathed. "So this is what I come home for! Walters and Peggy both

(Continued on page 111)

There was only one weapon the green-horn might use against the deadly, practiced guns of the Pasco Kid.



DEATH SONG

The Pasco Kid didn't want to dance. He wanted to kill. . . .

By **DANE GREGORY**

NO ONE had heard him arrive. He made his entrance on the next to the last bar of *Sheep and Goat*, and by that time Dad Rivard's music had taken hold of the square dancers so that noise beat in a hard, rocking rhythm from the floor of the loft.

The Kid came unobtrusively into that

noise, quiet as the shadow that spread itself under his small, trim feet. He waited there against the starlight. Rivard was the first man to see him.

Bent low over his bucking fiddle, Dad Rivard's shiny head caught the draught from the open door. He looked at the shadow and then at the man above it, and the Pasco Kid returned that look, his face back-lighted by a cigarette so that Dad Rivard could read the sleepy challenge in his eyes.

Even without the cigarette, he would have known it was there. It was always there in the Kid's gray eyes, as much a part of him as the jack-deuce tilt of his head or the crossed cartridge belts from which his hands seldom strayed very far. It was nothing more or less, thought Dad Rivard, than the Kid's wry soul staring out on a world it would never be able to understand.

His bow cut down in a hard double-stop, so that some of his sorrow ached in the fiddle-strings.

Knowing the Pasco Kid as well as anyone got to know him, Dad Rivard knew why the Kid was here. A man who liked little ironies, he had come to Chet Cameron's barn dance for the sole purpose of killing Chet Cameron. And Dad Rivard was sorry for Chet—a good neighbor about to die because he himself had never mastered the technique of homicide.

He was still more sorry for Chet's young wife and for Chet's son Jimmy, not yet sturdy enough to step out of his crib and assume the management of a thousand-acre ranch. It was the living, after all, who paid the cost of these things. At peace with themselves, the Kid's five other victims slept on; but three of them had left wives and children who probably suffered from insomnia now and then.

Yet Dad Rivard was a compassionate man, and even at this moment he could spare the Pasco Kid a little of his pity, too.

He looked at the Kid, standing there with his winter-killed face turned to the warmth within, and thought of him as a lonely man

who was no less wretched because he did not know he was lonely.

He had no friends, not even among those who simulated friendship out of fear. He would never be able to fill his lungs with the sociable laughter of a crowd like this; and knowing it, was about to destroy that laughter because his confused envy had no other means of expression. . . . That was why the Kid lived by his guns, whether he realized it or not. Unable to copy the men he envied, he killed them instead.

CHET CAMERON bawled, "You know where and I don't care!" Mrs. Pengruber's plump fingers drove a final chord into the teeth of the piano, and Dad Rivard closed the pasture gate on *Sheep and Goat*. Someone whooped ecstatically, swinging the shy Mutrie girl so that her skirts exposed nearly an inch of ribbed wool. That was how the square dance ended—on a flurry of skirts and laughter.

No one else had seen the Pasco Kid as yet. Under Mrs. Pengruber's disapproving eye, Dad Rivard took a pull from the crockery jug and set his nerves against the moment that was bound to come before long.

"All right, folks!" Chet Cameron shouted from yonder end of the loft. "This one'll be a tag waltz! Get your pardners for a tag waltz, folks!"

He caught his wife by the wrists and swung her out onto the powdered floor. Small against his awkward bulk, she tossed her head so that it took a dull golden shine from the gooseneck lamp above. They were laughing together as they danced, a man and a woman who needed no music because they could make their own.

But Dad Rivard sighed for both of them. Fiddle under his chin again, he shut his eyes and drew a dream from the strings.

It was a fiddle worth dreaming over, this one was, and it would be a better one yet when ten thousand songs had mellowed in the golden wood. Dad Rivard had made it

himself—an achievement that left him pious rather than proud.

For it was providence—rather than craftsmanship that determined the quality of a violin. He had made others in his time—more of them than he wanted to remember—and had thereupon beaten them to matchsticks against his lathe. They had been cross-grained and balky from the first, and a bad fiddle was something that only grew worse with age.

Like a gunman, for instance. Like the Pasco Kid, whose voice drifted over to him now.

"Figured I'd tag," said the Pasco Kid. "Enjoy a nice waltz myself."

Chet Cameron said flatly, "You ain't welcome here, Kid," and Dad Rivard opened his eyes. He held the last note of *That Faraway Girl*, pulling it out till it grained like taffy.

It was all over but the shooting now. The Kid had made his presence known, and fear had come with him into the loft so that the waltzers moved like pieces of machinery, stiff and unliving. He had taken their laughter because he could not laugh himself.

The Kid stood there in the middle of the floor with one of his hands on Chet Cameron's arm and the other hung casually in his gunbelt. The Kid's small, close-packed body leaned slightly from the hips; and the Kid's mouth had chilled in a shadowy smile that was worse than no smile at all. It was his you-be-damned pose—his murder pose.

He said to Chet Cameron, "Now I take that unkindly, Chet. I'll admit I didn't pitch in and help you raise your barn, but I thought everybody and his hound had an invite to this dance." His pale hand flexed on Chet Cameron's arm. "So I came, and I figure to dance. I'm tagging you, Chet."

"I'll dance with him," said Joy Cameron. She spoke through lips the color of lead, but they tried to curve engagingly at the Kid.

"No," said Chet. "No. That wouldn't end it, honey."

And it wouldn't, thought Dad Rivard. The issue was one that had to be faced sometime, and Chet was facing it now.

The Pasco Kid didn't want to dance. He wanted to kill, and he had chosen the quickest means to an end. This was a cool and studied affront, as everyone knew. It was for having said the wrong word about Joy Cameron that Chet had stretched him unconscious in the street.

"My dance," the Kid insisted. "You named it a tag waltz your ownself, didn't you? Then the only fair and square thing is to just leave go of the—lady."

His lips smiled over the word, bending it into an uglier shape; and Chet swung his wife out of the way. His open hand against the Kid's mouth made a noise like the slap of a beaver's tail on water.

But the Pasco Kid had expected that; it was what he'd been playing for. He rode the slap a couple of times and hung his hands within striking distance of the two matched Colts.

"I call you, Chet," said the Pasco Kid. "You're good at hitting men half your size. Let's see how good you are with a gun."

"I'm not heeled."

"Then get heeled."

"There'll be no shooting up here, Pasco. It wouldn't matter to you, maybe; but there're women and children around."

The Kid smiled his smile again. "Never figured on doing it here. I'll be waiting for you out past your new barn, Chet. There's enough moonlight so we won't scratch up the paint. You be there pretty soon, will you?"

"I'll be there," said Chet Cameron.

"Finish your waltz, though. I wouldn't want to beat any man out of a nice waltz." The Kid turned his smile on Dad Rivard: "Give 'em the same thing again, Daddy—only make it a little more slow and sad. Kind of suggestive, *sabe?*"

Dad Rivard had put down his fiddle long moments ago. There was silence now, and the Kid's boot heels punched small, clean

holes in that silence as he cocked his elbows and swung out the open door.

JOY CAMERON said in a whisper, "No, Chet. No!"

Chet Cameron's long brown face was stiff with resolve. His fingers closed on his wife's arm and he looked down into her eyes as if there were no one else around. "I've got to do it, Joy. Some day maybe there won't be killers running loose in this country, but that ain't now. And a man has to fight 'em when they want to fight, honey. It's how things are."

"You could—"

"I could put it off, maybe," Chet Cameron said, "but there's nothing that poisons a man's life like borrowed air. Maybe it's the Kid's time, honey. Think of it that way, will you?"

But everyone knew it was Chet Cameron's time, including Chet Cameron.

Mrs. Pengruber's elbow drew a nervous trill from the piano, and then the hush closed down again. Chet slowly promenaded his wife across that wide bare floor. His gunbelt hung on a nail at the end of the loft; and Chet took it down and cinched it around his middle.

Joy Cameron said, "Be careful, Chet." Her eyes memorized his face.

"Sure," said Chet. "Sure I will, honey. . . . Don't think this is gonna break up the dance, folks! We'll have us another cow-drille soon as I get back."

Loose-gaited and awkward, he strode through the utter silence toward the door.

Dad Rivard settled back in his chair and drew a long, long sigh. "Wait," he called softly.

"Huh?" Chet broke stride and gave him an unseeing stare. "Oh. Well, I got to do it, Dad. There's no use trying to—"

"You ain't got a dog's chance," said Dad Rivard. "You're wearing your gun like a woman's bustle, for one thing. And you're slow, Chet. The Kid's as fast as a Virginia reel and you're as slow as justice."

Chet's lips bent in a joyless smile. "Appreciate that, Dad. Trying to keep me from getting overconfident, huh?"

"No," sighed Dad Rivard. "No, Chet. I always sort of tried to stay out of other men's quarrels, but you and your wife have been mighty nice to me. . . . I'm hoping to save your life, Chet. There's only one way that a slow-draw man could ever beat the Pasco Kid."

Chet Cameron's eyes showed a sudden live interest. "Since when has there been any way at all?"

"Since the first," said Dad Rivard. "D'I ever tell you that I came from the same neck of the woods as the Pasco Kid? Well, I did—and I happened to see him make his first kill, Chet. It wasn't a man. It was a horse."

The interest faded out of Chet Cameron's eyes. "How long a windy is this, Dad? I ought to be—"

"Wait. It ain't any windy and it ain't very long. This here broomtail had pitched him for the third time, see, and the Kid came up with a gun in his hand and shot the horse in the head. Square. Well, that bronc was dead on its feet, but it staggered a couple of steps toward the Kid before it fell. . . . And, Chet, the Kid was scared." "Scared?"

"So spooked," said Dad Rivard, "that his next three shots went wild. Then the bronc dropped dead in the dust—and the Kid laughed a funny high laugh and put his last two bullets where the first had gone. Square."

Chet Cameron shifted his heels in a restless way. "Dad, I don't see—"

"Wait. The next time, Chet, it was a man—and the same thing happened. He got that man on the first shot, but the man didn't fall right away. And, Chet, I'm telling you—the Kid was so white-eyed scared that he put his next four bullets in the ceiling."

Dad Rivard fondled the fiddle neck and turned his eyes inward on memory. "Saw

that, too. Soon's the body fell, the Kid drew his other gun and drove six bullets into a man already dead. Square."

Chet Cameron studied the words. "I still don't—"

"Figure it out," said Dad Rivard. "Those two guns of his are the only things in the world that the Pasco Kid ever loved or put any trust in. And when he figures his guns have gone back on him, what has he got left? Nothing. He's lost. He's empty. He's like you or me would be if—well, if we lost somebody we thought a lot of."

"I see," Chet Cameron said slowly. "You mean—"

"Stand with your back to the barn, Chet, and your feet a little way out. That'll brace your body when you take his first lead. . . . Don't go down. Whatever happens, don't drop and try to get him from the ground. See what I mean?"

"Start walking toward him after he's shot me?"

"And training your sights while you walk. If he don't kill you on the first shot, that gives you a better than even chance. He can't hit a man that he figures his guns ain't good enough to stop."

Chet Cameron said solemnly, "Dad, if I come back—"

Dad Rivard twanged a fretful E-string. "You can thank me then. If you can't thank me then, I won't deserve any thanks. . . . Better get it over with, Chet."

"Yeah."

Chet Cameron stiffened his shoulders and went to the door, the holstered sixgun slapping his flank.

AFTER the first crash of gunfire, no one thought it likely that there would be another. The heavy timbers rebuffed its echoes so that it had a flat, clean, conclusive quality like a period at the end of a man's obituary.

No one spoke.

Joy Cameron put her face in her hands and swayed slowly, and the shy Mutrie

female whimpered once, but no one spoke.

The night's deep quiet poured across that sound and then came apart when a second crash fell: and another, and another, and finally a solid, cumulative roar that could only be the noise of two guns rocking in unison.

Afterwards, the hush filled in again.

It was a silence short enough if measured by watch-ticks but illimitable in terms of human stress. Even when they heard the footsteps outside, no one knew the name of their owner. They sent a flurry of crisp, incisive echoes up the runway leading to the loft; but they might have been made by a little man dead sure of himself or by a bigger one from whose shoulders an intolerable weight had just been lifted.

Dad Rivard dropped his rosin cake.

Mrs. Pengruber jostled the keyboard again, and Joy Cameron took her hands from her eyes and looked to the open door.

"Chet!" she breathed unbelievably. "Chet. . . ."

He was there. He stood wide-legged in the door of the loft, his mouth set in an arduous smile and his right hand cupped against the seepage of blood from his shoulder. He was teetering gently on his heels; but still and all, he was there.

Joy Cameron went slowly toward him, as skeptical as everyone else in that quiet room. "Chet! Is he really . . . ?"

"He is," said Chet.

"Are you—?"

"I'm all right, honey. He got me once in the right shoulder, but it's nothing Doc Keefer can't fix up in a hurry. And we ain't letting this spoil our dance, folks—understand that? We all came here for a good time, and that's what we're going to have, in spite of hell and high water!"

Dad Rivard picked up the fallen rosin and drew it mechanically down his bow. It was a long moment before he realized that Chet Cameron had tottered across the floor and was looking down at him, his face white.

"Figure that's the way it ought to be,"

said Chet. "Don't you, Dad? Dead or alive, seems to me like we hadn't ought to let the Kid break up our dance. It's going to go on!"

"I guess you're right, Chet," Dad Rivard said slowly. "Uh—put something over him, though, will you? Hate to think of any man laying down there, all—"

"I done that already, Dad. I'll send the coroner out after him when I ride in to get this shoulder fixed. . . . Want to thank you a whole lot, Dad. It was how you said it would be."

"Figured it was." The old man pursed his lips and examined his bow long and carefully against the light.

"Hadn't been for what you told me, I'd have dropped flat when he nailed me with that first shot. And I guess he'd have killed me then, all right—he was 'way ahead of me on the draw. Kept on moving toward him, though, and the Kid started shooting at the moon. He looked like death in the foothills."

"Like I told you, Chet, his guns were the only things he ever believed in. Well, it had to be. Sooner or later it had to be. That's all."

"I'm kind of glad it was sooner, though. I'm thanking you again for my life, Dad, and I'll be thanking you louder when there's more life in me. Play some tunes for the bunch while I'm gone."

The Mutrie girl let out the breath she'd been holding inside her for minutes—and folks kind of began to relax.

Dad picked up his fiddle again.

Watching Chet Cameron move to the door, he fitted the instrument close to his collarbone and drew the first whispering note of *Morir Sonando* from its strings. And the thought came again to Dad Rivard that there were men in whom the melodies of life ran deep and strong, vibrating through them so that they gave out harmonies as instinctively as his new violin. The world had need of fiddles like this; and it would always have need of men like Chet Cameron.

But when a craftsman has poured his dreams and his hopes into a fiddle born to make discords, he can weep for that instrument even after he has beaten it to matchsticks on his lathe.

As Dad Rivard was weeping now, his head bent low so that no one would know he had lost a son tonight. ● ● ●

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HANG BILL GATLIN



—But do it real sudden-like, or his long-geared friends will see to it that the noose is empty again!

By WADE HAMILTON

THEY had Bill Gatlin in jail in Lusk, Wyoming, and they were going to hang him because he had killed Deputy Sheriff Gunn. This time, lawmen said gleefully, they had the Texas killer, and Bill Gatlin, lanky and rangy, sat on his bunk and moodily agreed with them—this was one jail he couldn't get out of by his own efforts. But the Wyoming lawmen did not stretch the neck of the Texas killer. For Bill Gatlin broke jail as he had so many times before.

But he had outside help.

Before shooting down the deputy, Bill had punched cows around old Fort Laramie for the K-e-line outfit, and the range-boss of this spread liked him. Maybe the range-boss also had a twisted backtrail, for he went by the name of Tom Hall, while down in Texas he was known as Tom Nichols. Tom Hall had friends, and to one of these cronies he said, "Joe, that Texas boy—they're made up their minds to make him dance on air."

"You mean Gatlin?"

"Yeah, Gatlin."

The friend rubbed his whisky jaw. Tom Hall said, "Another round here, bartender." He looked at his friend. "You ain't cracked a safe for years, have you?"

"Not so loud, Tom, please!"

"Why don't you make a mess outa crackin' a safe? Then the local law can nab you an' they'll throw you in jail with Bill Gatlin, hacksaw blades and all. They's only one cell in that calaboose."

"I'd be bound to get in with Bill, hacksaw blades and all?"

"You would."

There was a short pause.

"You need new boots. Your clothes look awful. You're broke, friend." Tom Hall poured it on. "You need a new change of scenery, too. What about five hundred bucks, cash, right now?"

"All right, Tom."

So that night the town marshal caught the safe-cracker making a mess out of a local safe, and into jail he went. Bill Gatlin looked at him and smiled crookedly. "Tom Hall told me about you."

"Tom's got hosses ready for us . . . outside."

"Yeah, outside . . ." Gatlin was a little cynical. But his cynicism was wasted. Within an hour he had a good horse under him, free air in his lungs—and behind him the noose dangled empty.

"I sure can't thank you enough, Tom."

"I'd do it even for one of my brothers."

Bill Gatlin turned in his stirrups and looked back at the lights of Lusk. He blew

IN THE MORNING!

the town a rough kiss. "Goo'bye, Lusk. I'll never see you again."

"Where you headin' for, Bill?"

"South America. Argentina."

Tom Hall rubbed his jaw. "Might head down that direction with you, but I reckon not. I ain't got the pressure on me that you have, Bill. Well, this is the fork, friend, and good luck."

They shook hands.

Tom Hall rode toward the Keeline Ranch. Bill Gatlin swung his horse and loped south, heading across Wyoming for Texas. As he rode he hummed a tune and his heart was light.

Once again he had evaded the hungry noose.

BILL had been lucky in missing the hempen necktie. He had been born and reared in south Texas. As a youth, he'd drifted north into the Panhandle country. At that time—in the late '70s—the Panhandle region, an area of immense cow-outfits, was a tough country—but young Bill Gatlin, whose real name was Bill Brogart, was a tough young cowboy.

He proved it in the battle of Tascosa. Tascosa, which sprang up over night, had, before many years, about eighteen cowboys in boothill. It was gun against gun, and when the smoke cleared away, four cowboys lay dead and two others were wounded. One of Bill Gatlin's cowpuncher friends was shot to pieces, but he pulled through. Bill Gatlin, as usual, was unharmed.

"Right tough battle," he afterwards said. "I don't like to hear them bullets sing so close but if one is goin' hit a man it hits him, that's all."

After leaving Wyoming, he picked up a youth from the east, who wanted to be a badman. He and Bill Gatlin went to Santa Fe, New Mexico Territory. There Bill told the youth to drift out with another partner.

"But I wanta travel with you, Bill."

"Where I'm goin', kid, I'm goin' alone. An' don't follow me, savvy?"

"Heck, you're funnin' me, Bill."

He could not make the youth believe him. For a few weeks he laid around the ranch of a friend—one wounded in the battle of Tascosa—and the kid followed him to the ranch. Again Gatlin told him not to follow him.

"That kid follers me any further," he told the ranch-owner, "an' I'm goin' kill him. He jest cain't listen to reason, 'pears like."

One morning Bill Gatlin saddled a fresh horse and headed south. The youth followed him later. That was the last ever seen of him. The ranch-owner rounded up some saddlehorses a few days later. In the bunch was the kid's bronc, still saddled, the bridle off the horse and hanging from the saddlehorn. There was dried blood on the seat of the kak.

Bill Gatlin sold his horse, caught the passenger train, and rode the cushions to New Orleans. There, one day in the early '80s, stevedores were loading a freighter, bound for Buenos Aires, Argentina. A bowlegged young man, carrying a bed roll, came up the gangplank. He spoke to the captain, saying he was the cook's flunky. The captain eyed him speculatively.

"Ever be a cook's flunky before, fellow?"

"Sure have. Used to cook myself." Bill Gatlin was a good liar, too. "Roundup cook many a year."

"Go see the cook."

"Okay, sir."

Within a few hours the freighter nosed away from the dock. Bill Gatlin leaned over the rail and watched the shoreline disappear. He was leaving the land of his birth, the land of the saddle, the cow-outfits, the endless rolling green prairies of his native Lone Star State.

Slowly the shoreline slipped away.

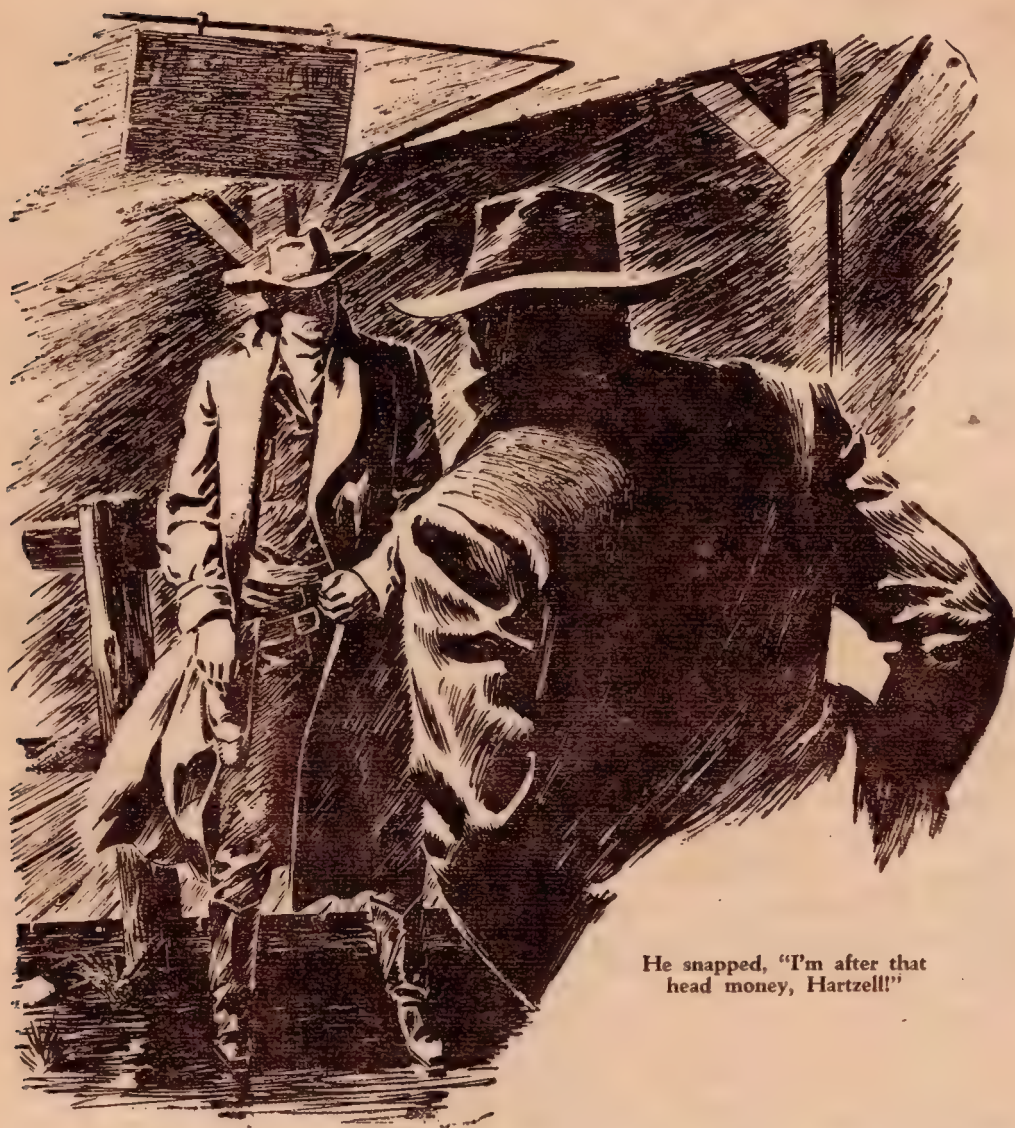
Was he seeing again the dusty street of Tascosa? Did he see the dust, and the gunsmoke, and did he hear again the ugly snarl of ugly guns? Was he seeing cattle moving north, thousands of longhorns, moving and pushing, the dust fine against the red sun?

Who knows?

• • •

THE MAN FROM POMONA

By ROBERT L. TRIMNELL



He snapped, "I'm after that head money, Hartzell!"

THE rain was a steady, pounding barrage now, beating through Clay Hartzell's poncho and streaming icily down his thighs into his boots. His horse plodded wearily through the muck that was about to become the single, straight street of Three Forks. The animal shivered and steam rose off it.

Everyone in Three Forks would welcome Clay Hartzell back home. . . . For who wouldn't be mighty glad to see that much bounty-money come riding down the street?

As the rain-darkened town came into view, he felt no elation at his return. He identified Dandy Bill's blacksmith shop; and the Mercantile on the corner wearing a new coat of red barn paint. He saw Jameson's Saloon and the Three Forks Hotel, all of them lined up with their shoulders together, facing each other across the mud trough of the street. He identified them but had no feeling for them. It was all washed away, like the rain was washing the sweat off his weary roan. Maybe the feeling had never amounted to more than the roan's sweat, he thought. He'd ridden the Three Forks country for six years, before it happened, and in the two years since, it had all eaten away, all the feelings he'd had, and the remembrances.

Take Bunco Jameson, who ran the saloon. A round-faced man with a quick cackle of laughter, who used to say, "It ain't the thirty and found, Clay, it's how purty the boss's daughter is," when Clay came in. Bunco knew. He read people's feelings that way, though he was such a poor hand at business he couldn't remember how many drinks you had, and always came up with a short total. That's why there was no new paint on the saloon.

But all he could remember now of Bunco's face was a round mask, red and brittle with anger. Always that tight-lipped anger smeared over the face of the Bunco he used to know.

Clay rode to Hoffman's livery stable. He led his horse in and saw Pedro come running up. Pedro was the old Mex with the game leg who hostlered for Hoffman. He came limping up, grinning as always. He didn't seem to recognize Clay, with the poncho draped over him and the brim of his hat beaten down by the weight of the rain, drooping over his face.

"Hiya, stranger," he grinned. "What ees name you leave theese caballo under?"

"Clay Hartzell," Clay said, and turned on his heel and walked out to the board walk. Behind him was dead silence. Pedro was probably too shocked even to gasp.

He stepped up on the board walk and strode down toward the saloon. He reached under his poncho and felt the .44 holstered at his hip. The holster squeaked under his thumb, damp, but not badly wetted. He eased the gun up. Satisfied, he strode on to the saloon.

The outer doors were closed against the rain. He opened the right one and then had to push through a flap of the batwings. Through the double doors to the warmth of the saloon, humid with wet clothes sweating out near the stove. It smelled of the horse wetness men had brought in, and the steaming leather of a pair of boots somebody had stepped out of and left too close to the stove.

"Draw up the stove and sit down on her," Bunco yelled.

They all laughed—there were several men standing at the bar—but their laughs were polite, since they didn't recognize him. Just another long-built Texan wet from the rain and hidden under his poncho. One of them said, "Looks like Slim Baiser."

Clay took off his hat and gave them a cold-eyed stare. He knew them all. Bucktooth rode for Big Mike. Dandy Bill, the blacksmith, held a mug of beer up against his leather apron, and an iron forearm rested on the bar edge. There was Nelsom, a shoestring from down Piute way, and there was Dinton who ran the mercantile, staring over his iron-rimmed glasses as he sipped a small glass of beer. And last, there was Bunco, grinning and showing his oversized porcelain teeth.

Bunco's teeth disappeared. His red face paled. When they saw Clay's face, they became stiff, mouths gaping. Dinton, who was always short on steadiness anyhow, spilled his small beer.

Clay deliberately turned his back to them and walked to the stove. He took off his hat and poncho and hung them on a chair and kicked it up to the back of the stove. He took off his jacket too. It left his gun free. He walked to the bar and said, "I'll have a glass of whiskey, Bunco."

Dandy Bill, the blacksmith, spoke first. He growled, "You got your damn nerve, Hartzell!"

"I got a gun on my hip, too," Clay said tightly. "And I mean for you all to keep your distance. I'm drinking alone."

CLAY saw that flat look of hatred on Bunco's face now. The saloonkeeper wiped fat hands on his apron, seized a bottle and glass and brought them down the bar and banged them on the mahogany in front of Clay. Their eyes met.

"What the idee, Clay?" Bunco growled.

Clay took a waterproof package of oiled cloth from his pocket and opened it. It contained his makings and matches. He smelled the wet rising steamily off his shirt. The tin roof of the place hammered constantly, and their voices were louder than they realized, in order to combat it. He built himself a quirk before replying.

"I come back to see if you all still think I killed Sammy." He tucked the point of the cigarette in his mouth and selected a match from the box in the makings package. He scratched it harshly on his fingernail and sucked the flame into the tobacco. His mouth was too tight for it to taste good, too drawn-up and bad tasting, hating. "I come back to see if there's anybody in Three Forks country that believes I *didn't* do it."

Bunco said, "You know there's a bounty on your head, Clay?"

"Yeah."

"And you still come back?"

"That's right." He turned to the four men down the bar and grinned faintly. "Any of you here figure to collect that head money?"

None of them replied.

Clay poured his glass half full and took a long drink of the whiskey. It went down his gullet and burned.

Bunco said, "I don't believe that, Clay. You come back for better reason than to see if we still think you killed Sammy Wilson."

"Maybe I've got proof I didn't kill Sammy."

"You couldn't have proof, Clay. This fella Abe Green, the trail driver you sold those cows to, he swears it was you that passed the cows over to him, signed the receipt with your name, and took the money. We figured you and Sammy Wilson stole the cows and sold 'em, then you killed Sammy out there in the line cabin. Why, when we come up, you was just actin' like a half-wild wolf—"

"Sammy and me had been in the line cabin five months. You jam two men together that long, and they get savage, I don't care who they are. I came back from makin' a stock count—it turned out damn short—and found Sammy shot dead. You all were waitin' for me, and closed in on the line shack once I was in it."

"That's thin, Clay. I don't see how you can prove your way out of it."

Clay shrugged and drank some more whiskey. It went down hot to his stomach but spread no further. As though his body was so cold from rage and bitterness that mere physical heat could not warm it.

Dandy Bill said, "Here comes Big Mike."

Clay asked, "Alone?"

He saw Bunco shoot him a quick glance. He wished he hadn't said that. Big Mike Davis was Mary's father, and Clay's former boss, owner of the Big M spread. It was Big M cows that Clay had supposedly rustled off to sell to Abe Green. They figured that Clay and Sammy Wilson had done it together—Sammy's reputation wasn't so good that a rustling would be put past him—and then Clay had killed Sammy in a fight over the spoils.

Dandy Bill said, "No, he ain't alone. There's Mary, and Slim Baiser's helpin' her open the buckboard, and Slim and her's goin' into the mercantile. They're all soaked and look like they'd started off afore the rain begun." He added, "It's going to be a slow business-Saturday." Then Dandy Bill remembered Clay, and his talk about business suddenly seemed very unimportant. Business might be slow this Saturday, but it wouldn't be a shopping day that would be easily forgotten.

The outside door opened and wind howled through the slats of the batwing. Big Mike Davis barged in. Powerful, gray-haired, shouldering through and gasping like a blown horse. "Shoot, if this ain't weather for yuh!" he bellowed.

He peered up, from under the sagged brim of his hat, eyes blinking away the rain. "Why the deuce is ever'body actin' like church meetin' is about to start? Somebody dead?"

Bunco was the first to speak. "Yeah. Sammy Wilson's dead."

Big Mike frowned, raised a dripping eyebrow toward the bartender.

His gaze swept the bar, puzzled, half-smiling, as though expecting some joke. Then his eyes lit on Clay.

He straightened up and forgot his wetness. At last he spoke, gruffly. "I didn't figger to see you."

"No," Clay said, laconically. He poured some more whiskey, finished his cigarette, and flipped it to the spittoon.

"I figured you was ridin' a wide trail up no'th."

"It was wide. And long. I hunted a fella named Abe Green. That's why I busted out of Pomona jail. I wanted to get my hands on Abe Green."

He didn't tell them if he'd found Abe Green. He let them think it over. Let *them* think something over, for a change. He'd had it burning him dry for two years on the cattle trails to the north. He realized now that he was being surly to them. He didn't care.

Big Mike said, "Don't you go figgerin' that Abe Green lied about you. I knew Abe years ago, and he was a square jasper."

"I didn't try to figure it that way. But Abe Green didn't come to the trial and identify me, either. He was in Kansas by that time." Clay stepped away from the bar and walked to where his hat and poncho were drying. He put them on, hot and steamy, and strode to the door. Big Mike blocked his way.

"Where you headed?"

Clay said, "I used to feel proud about a certain girl."

HE SHOVED past and flung the batwing open, opened the outer door and stepped into the downpour. As he clambered down off the board walk into the muck of the street, he saw a man leaving the mercantile. A tall fellow huddled in soaking clothes. His head was bent down and he hurried through the rain, cursing as the mud grabbed at each boot. He didn't look up at Clay, but Clay stopped him with:

"H'lo, Slim. Remember me?"

The man jerked around at the sound of his voice. He was Slim Baiser, Big Mike's, segundo. Icy gray eyes met Clay's on a level. His hand clawed at his raincoat.

"You don't want that gun, Slim. Your hands are cold and they're goin' to just fumble it out into the mud. My hands are all warmed up nice, and I always did have a fast draw, Slim."

The foreman at last found words. "You—jailbird—Hartzell! What in hell are you doin'—"

"Come back lookin' for somebody, Slim." He turned and plowed on through the mud to the porch of the mercantile. He, was about to step up on the boardwalk, but he spun suddenly toward the man in the street.

Slim had torn his raincoat open and his hand poised over his gun.

"Slim, I told you, your hands are too cold to do any good with that. Go on over to Bunco's. I'll watch you inside."

For a long moment Baiser stared at him. Then the flap of his raincoat fell back to place. He snapped, "I'm after that head money, Hartzell!"

Clay answered, "Git goin'."

He waited until Baiser was inside the saloon. Then he climbed the porch to the mercantile. He stamped the mud from his feet, scraped the soles on the edge of the porch, and opened the door. He took his hat off as he entered. Mrs. Dinton was behind the counter. She was very near-sighted and her glasses rose high trying to see him well. He asked, "Is Miss Mary still here?"

"Why, she's in back puttin' on some dry duds; poor girl got soaked to the skin. Who's callin'? Why, it's—it's Clay Hartzell!"

"Yes. Ma'am. Bad penny turned up." He heard a voice from the back room, a clear, girl's voice.

"Miz Dinton, I love this gray taffeta, but I don't know if Daddy will let me buy it or not—anyhow, can I wear it until my dress is dry? Here, I'll show you what a pretty thing it is!"

Mary Davis came running out into the store, not seeing Clay, but slapping the crinkling taffeta down off her hips and shrugging the bodice. Clay barely saw the dress. He saw Mary's auburn hair and level blue eyes and impudent nose. Then her eyes touched him. She stopped with her head to the side and her eyes locked, level on him. She did not seem surprised. Without moving, she said:

"Clay. You're back."

He nodded, rather foolishly. He couldn't think of a word to say. His mind was wandering back more than two years. It was early fall; a golden evening beginning to fade to darkness. She'd been sitting on the top rail of the corral and he standing by her. After a while he'd climbed up and sat beside her, not talking, but watching the evening die. Then he'd put his arm around her slender waist and drew her close.

They stared at each other for a long time. He said, "Will you go over to the hotel with me and have a cup of coffee? I want to talk. And—" A touch of humor came to his eyes. He said, "I can hide behind

your skirt, too. There's people who'd shoot me for bounty like a coyote, but not with a lady in the way."

She nodded. She looked quickly around, saw a coat laying on the counter, and seized it up.

Mrs. Dinton cried, "Mary Davis, are you buying that coat and dress? That's not your coat and—"

"Please, Mrs. Dinton—I'll make it right," she cried. Clay wrapped the coat around her and they hurried out into the down-pour.

THEY sat at the far corner of the hotel dining room. It was late afternoon, and but for a waiter by the hall door, it was empty. The first cup of coffee went cold on them.

They sat a long time without speaking. Then Mary's practical, woman sense made her ask, "What are you waiting for, Clay?"

"A man. Coming from Pomona. He'll arrive in a couple of hours."

"Who is he?"

"I won't answer that now. But a man is coming—in a buckboard—from Pomona. When he arrives it will be proved that I didn't kill Sammy Wilson. Do you believe me when I say that?"

"Yes. I never believed that you killed him, Clay. Never."

"I wish I could be sure of that." His hands were hot and trembling. Strangely, he was afraid now of her believing in him; he was afraid to lose the hard shell he'd built up. The shell was melting as he seized on her words, hungrily, remembering now as at a great distance the two years when he'd been on the dodge, hunting for Abe Green. Cruising the trail towns, asking, always asking for Abe Green.

She reached into the bodice of her dress and drew out a locket hanging from a fine gold chain around her neck. But it wasn't a locket. It was a miniature wagon wheel made of lead, no more than a half inch in diameter. Clay remembered it. There'd been a party—and he and Mary had pulled at opposite ends of a snapjack. The wagon wheel had been the favor.

"I've kept that, Clay."

He nodded. He couldn't meet her eyes. The hard shell was melted and he felt like a dog now for not having believed in her. He said, "D'you mind if I smoke?"

"Please do, Clay."

He rolled a quiry with trembling fingers. He was eyeing the doorway now. He was suddenly afraid. Inside of his shell there had been no fear. Bitterness and anger gave you a hard coating. When you were under sentence of death, with not a friend in the world, little worse could happen. Now he felt naked; he remembered the reward posters with his picture on them. He eyed the windows; a bounty hunter need only shoot through and kill him where he sat, to collect the reward.

"Clay."

She had opened her purse and now laid a little cubed box on the table between them. It was pink and fuzzy-surfaced. She opened it. A diamond flashed out at him. She took it out of the box and put it on her third finger, left hand. Not all the way, just to the first knuckle and held it out to show him.

"Slim Baiser," she said. "The ranch is doing very well. Daddy thinks much of it is due to Slim. He's a hard worker, you know, Clay. He drives the men—there's Bucktooth, Jerry, Pablo, and a couple of new fellows from the Nueces. There's no sagging barb wire, no unbranded cattle, not a grazing movement that Slim can't pinpoint."

Tightly, "You're saying Slim is a good foreman."

"He's working hard. Daddy feels the ranch is in good hands. He takes it easier now."

"I see." He could have added more. So Slim intended to marry the boss's daughter. That would be very nice. Especially since Big Mike couldn't live forever. The Big M was something nice to get your hands into. A smart man could do much worse than to marry Mary Davis.

Bunco had said that, two years ago. The man who married the boss's daughter was fixed for life. Clay had been number-one man with Mary Davis. The other fellows hadn't a chance.

Now Slim Baiser was top man. Could Slim have framed this killing on Clay in order to make Mary free for his own purpose?

Slowly, he rose. He looked down once at the diamond, flashing, the ring hanging loose on the end of her finger. He said, "You don't wear it, Mary?"

"Slim gave it to me months ago. I said no, but he said, 'Well, keep it in your pocket until you decide. The glitter in that stone will grow on you'."

"Has it?"

"The ring is still in the box." She took it off her finger and replaced it, dropped the little cube back into her handbag.

Clay said, "Mary, I'm going to leave you. Don't say anything about the man—the man from Pomona."

He did not look down at her again, but his fingers touched the soft lightness of her hair in passing. His hand dropped to her shoulder; trembled against it. He hurried away.

IN THE cold blast of the rain, his shell seemed to grow again, thickening and hardening. It was dark now and the board walk slippery. He walked with his head high, watching the blackness around him. He followed the board walk to the saloon. He paused a moment outside. The man from Pomona would surely get here tonight. He must have been about half way to Three Forks when the rain started, and, not knowing this country, he wouldn't find any suitable place to hole up for the night. Clay knew the Pomona road well. He'd freighted too much stuff for Big Mike over that road, not to know it. No, that man from Pomona had to come on, barring a wagon breakdown.

He opened the saloon's outer door, and shoved through the batwings.

The place was jammed. There were at least thirty men crowding it. Clay couldn't figure how the news had spread so fast. Well, trouble news had that way about it, even in such weather as this. He stood there against the door and glared back at their cold hostility.

The one thing he had in his favor, he knew, was that they were shocked by the surprise of his return. A hunted man does not come back, openly, to the scene of the crime. But that gave only a short respite, and in that short time he must produce something, or they'd think him a fool and send him back to the Pomona jail.

Fortunately, there was no law here. The sheriff was in Pomona, and had no deputy here in Three Forks. Local law, burdened by the obligations of office, would have arrested him immediately.

He walked through the crowd now. He murmured, "Evenin', fellas."

His throat tightened as he spoke. Mary Davis's effect lingered. There were holes in the shell that protected him. He walked to the bar and two men spread out to let him in there. Still they were shocked at seeing this hunted man, this killer, come and go freely in their midst. Yet, any moment they wanted, they could leap upon him. So the situation he had created persisted, and Bunco stopped polishing glasses and asked, "What's yours, Clay?"

"I just came to pay for my drinks this afternoon. How much?"

The saloon man shrugged. "It's on the house. Look at all the business you brought me." He grinned and nodded over the room. Then the smile was gone. "I reckon you're up to something, Clay. Tell me what it is."

"I'm waiting for somebody to come. From Pomona."

He became aware that the saloon was very quiet, men holding their breath as he spoke. He let it hang there. Then Big Mike's voice boomed, "Are you sayin', Clay, that you found Abe Green?"

"I found him." Clay turned. Big Mike sat hunched over a table against the far wall. With him were Slim Baiser and Bucktooth. Slim glanced up coolly at Clay, seemingly less concerned than anyone else.

Big Mike said, "What did Green tell you?"

"He said the fellow that sold him the cows looked like me. He told me what kind of hat and jacket I wore that winter, right enough. He said it was comin' on dark when the sale was made. And his description of the other fella that was helpin' move the cows, that tallied with Sammy Wilson."

"Did he say he was sure it *wasn't* you?"

"No. He said it was darkening out. Besides, he didn't pay much attention. He'd been in the saddle fourteen hours, that day he bought the cows, and he had six thousand on the hoof movin'. Five hundred extra is a big wallop, and twenty thousand dollars is a lot of money, but still he had a awful big herd to worry about. He said if he saw me and the feller that did it—if he could compare the two of us, he'd come up with the right answer. He was sure of that."

Clay turned back to the bar. Bunco had set out a beer. Bunco had remembered

that. He always used to drink beer. Clay sipped it while the conversation buzzed behind him. He wished Bunco hadn't remembered the beer. It drilled another hole in his shell.

He looked in the bar mirror at the score of faces reflected there, faces he'd known ever since he came here as a sixteen-year-old hunting a riding job. Dandy Bill and Dinton, Bucktooth, that fella from off in the ridge country who had the pack of hounds—coyote dogs—what was his name? He became angry that the hardness was leaving him, feeling the warmth of the place too strongly. The door clattered. Without turning, he looked up into the mirror and called:

"I reckon nobody ought to leave here tonight."

Through the sea of faces he could not see who was at the door, but the mirror reflected the top of the door, open a few inches. Somebody cried, "Why not?"

"Because there might be somebody wanting to stop that buckboard comin' from Pomona. All of us know that trail. We know where you could drygulch a man ridin' a buckboard."

He didn't look back any more, stared down at his beer, heard the door close reluctantly.

H E CAUGHT Bunco's eye. Bunco was reading him. He averted his face. He didn't want Bunco to know what he was planning.

Bunco said, "Thet Sammy Wilson, he was a likeable enough fella. But I wouldn't put it past him to rustle a cow now and then. Sammy liked the faster kind of girls too well, and thirty and found don't buy many pretties for such girls."

The crowd assented to that. Inside, Clay agreed too. He'd spent that winter alone with Sammy. Sammy was a lot of fun for a short while. But he was not the man you wanted to winter with. He couldn't sit still, and the loneliness made his temper vicious and ready to flare like scorched cloth. Though, Clay himself had been no rosebud by the end of winter.

Men were standing at the window now, peering out and waiting for sign of the arriving buckboard.

Clay had finally found Abe Green. Green was headed for Montana with a Texas herd.

He'd agreed that on the return trip he'd accompany Clay back to Three Forks and Pomona. He was impressed with Clay's sincerity. He thought that a guilty man wouldn't want to return to Three Forks. So Clay had helped with the drive, counting the days until they could return.

Then, in the crossing of the Kaw in flood-time, the herd had stampeded. Half the herd was drowned, and so was Abe Green.

So Abe Green wasn't coming from Pomona tonight. And Clay hadn't said he was. He'd said a man was coming, and that was true.

He turned now and looked at them. Their reactions were curious. Some drank hard. Some not at all. He saw Big Mike staring at him, angry, yet holding back. Bucktooth was worried. He seemed afraid of Clay. Slim Baiser looked up and Clay saw the paleness of the man's face. He saw too that Slim was toying with his sixgun. It lay in his hand, loose, moving about as though his palms were sweaty and nervous.

"Slim, you wouldn't be thinking of collecting that bounty?"

"Maybe. A fella going to get married some day, he could use that cash."

"But see, Slim, I'm only asking you fellas to wait a half hour or so—until the man comes from Pomona. Don't get any ideas about going out to visit your maiden aunt tonight, either. Even if your maiden aunt's comin' in from Pomona."

Slim's hand tightened on the gun. His eyes were unsteady now. He shouted, "You're callin' me somethin'! Damn' if any jailbird can do that! By God, I'll claim that bounty—"

His gun raised. He'd broken the spell that had hung over the saloon. Men scattered away from Clay. They fell back before the leveled sixgun, and silence dropped over them like a curtain.

Then, through the drumming rain, came a pounding of hoofs in the sodden street, and a crunch against the porch as though a wheel hub had slid over against the building.

Their eyes all turned to the door; even Slim Baiser's. A man at the window gasped, "A buckboard!"

Feet stamped on the porch. There was a thin crackling outside as though someone was shaking out a rain slicker. A scraping as boots grated over the tin boot cleaner.

The knob on the outer door began to turn. The door pushed inward, shoving the batwing open before it.

A gun crashed. There was a second crash as the hanging lamp fell to the floor and shattered to a million pieces. In the dark, light spots roved before their eyes.

But in that last split second of light, Clay glimpsed Slim Baiser's gun pointed up at the light and saw it flare. Then the tall foreman plunged for the door. There was a sound of struggle at the doorway and a man crying out in surprise. The man from the buckboard being shoved aside by Slim.

Clay was already leaping for the door, through a surging tangle of men. He stumbled over a prostrate form and fell skidding across the wet boardwalk, falling off into the mud. He got up and already a man had torn a horse from the hitchrail and leaped into the saddle. There were only seconds until he would disappear into the curtain of rain.

Yet, he offered himself as target by firing back at them. He'd hoped to scatter them with the shot, but it only targeted him. Clay fired. A quick snapping shot at the blotch of horse and man fading into the rain curtain. He fired again when that failed, and the horse seemed to leap into the sky.

The animal went up but it had lost its footing, and crashed down heavily on its side. There was a scream from Slim Baiser. The horse struggled up and limped away. But the long blotch of man-shape lay squashed into the mud. Screaming, now.

Clay crowded up with the rest. They made a circle around Baiser, seeing him

lay there and scream, but not a man offered to help. Silent condemnation was in their eyes.

At last Big Mike Davis said, "It was you, Slim? You killed Sammy?"

"My God, my legs are broke, get me a doc!"

"Answer, Slim. And tell me where you hid the rest of the money, what you didn't plant on Clay. That way I'll know you ain't confessin' just to get a doctor for your hurts."

"No, no!"

"Slim, I'll bring the fella from Pomona here, he can tell if it was you or Clay that killed Sammy."

Baiser was broken. Between his groans he admitted it, and babbled about the place where the money was hidden. Clay left.

The man from Pomona stood on the boardwalk, bewildered. "Hey, it's you. The fella I talked to this mornin' in Pomona! What the devil's goin' on?"

"Long story," Clay grinned. The man before him was short and plump, with fat black mustaches. Clay said, "Say, aren't you a drummer in jewelry? Is that what you told me?"

"Sure, Jewelry, and also ladies' apparel. Underclothes, everything—say, you told me this mornin' somethin' about a girl—"

"I sure did, brother," Clay grinned. "Check over your engagement ring list and see what you got in stock for a quick sale. I'll see you tomorrow about it. I'm going to trade a ring for a little lead wheel."

He went off, whistling, in search of Mary. ● ● ●

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BUFFALO KILLER

★ ★ ★

The famous Sharps rifle of the Civil War became the instrument for destroying buffalo at a rate that exceeded that of all other weapons combined. During the war Sharps were used by sharpshooters. The rifle was adopted by the avid buffalo hunters, who propped their buffalo destroyers on sticks and blasted away at long range from their "stands". Many buffalo Sharps were equipped with telescopes. They were heavy rifles, packed great power at long range and were extremely accurate. Calibres ranged from .40 to .50, the most famous being the .45-120-550. The Sharps rifle was invented by Christian Sharps in 1848. It was of the percussion cap type, a breech loader and used a paper cartridge which the breech lock sheered to expose the powder to the action of the cap.

—J. W. Q.

THE TINHORN

The time comes when even a lone-wolf gambler like Dan Calderson feels the need of someone close who'll side him when the going gets tough. He knew he could count on nothing but grief from the lawman son who despised him. . . .

A Blazing Sixgun Saga

By KENNETH FOWLER

It was an even money bet that the man coming up the stairs would be Sime Turley....



PISTOLEERS!

DAN CALDERSON'S eyes held a nervous watchfulness as he turned from the hotel and started downstreet towards his Wheel of Fortune Saloon. Guy Hanna had told him, just yesterday, that the kid was back. Any day, any minute, he might bump into him,

It was a hell of a note for a man to feel the way he did, about the chance of running into his own son! A man could take a lot, from his own flesh and blood. Anything but contempt.

A big man, with a piercing look and a long



nose, scarred from a youthful barroom fracas, Calderson's face was set in an expression of dour preoccupation as he strode along the boardwalk. He wasn't interested in the familiar, practical sounds of the town's waking up.

Just this past year Frontier had grown out of its swaddling clothes. It was big enough to need both a marshal and deputy marshal to keep it in line, to hold its lusty pioneer spirit within the bounds set by law. And now, with the Kansas-Pacific's end-of-steel here, there was the assurance, finally, that Frontier's growth was not to be the flash-in-the-pan of so many similar towns along the fringes of the Santa Fe Trail, quick to be born, and as quick to sink into the limbo of vanished dust and gunsmoke. It was this factor, a certainty now, that had undoubtedly brought Clay back, as color and excitement—life swelling at the seams—always draws youth towards its glitter.

Calderson's mind reflected on this regretfully, as he crossed an intersection and continued on towards the Wheel Of Chance, two blocks farther on. His place had been the first of its kind here in Frontier. It still looked solid compared to the new cafes and dance halls that in the last couple of years had added a grimcrack tone to the town's main stem.

Clay, Calderson told himself, his thoughts pacing to the tempo of his quick, nervous strides, would hardly recognize the new Frontier. But he would see no difference in the man who had grown up with the town. He, Dan Calderson, was older, but otherwise unchanged, except for a bit more weight around the middle.

This town—so raw and new that you could still smell resin sweating from its boards on a hot day—was the mold that had shaped him, and what if his clay had now hardened beyond reworking? Mistakes he had made—which man didn't?—and he'd lived to regret them. But everything in life had to have a beginning and an end, and the trick was not to look behind you, not to let the dead years come flooding back on the tide of memory and make you uselessly miserable.

HE WAS jolted abruptly from his introspection by the sound of a voice calling: "Oh, Calderson! See you a min-

ute?" As he half swung, staring towards the sound, he saw King Cole, owner of the new Fiddlers Three Dance Hall, stepping out under the wooden awning of his establishment, smoothing a slim cigar between immaculately manicured hands.

Calderson frowned. He came to a halt facing the man who had instigated formation of Frontier's recently organized Civic Betterment Association.

He said brusquely: "Haven't changed my mind about that, Cole," but then, before he could move on, the Fiddlers Three owner had moved out to the boardwalk and stood beside him, still daintily rotating the cigar between his palms.

Cole, dapperly garbed in a black broadcloth jacket and flowered waistcoat, bit off the tip of the panetella and spat it out, saying, "Ad Ringgold's come in. And Mike Fessler is about set. Better hop on the band wagon, Calderson. Lew Akers' new Civic League won't have much chance against us, if we all stand together."

"Let the Civic League go where it smells the stink," Calderson retorted bluntly. "It'll find none at my place."

"I'm here to talk business with you, Calderson, not to discuss fumigation." Cole's thin-lipped mouth proffered a pinched smile. "And I'm not trying to buy your place outright. I'm merely proposing that you let me purchase a twenty-five per cent interest in it, so that we could—well, add a few features that might add to its attractiveness as a business proposition."

"Girls," Calderson said. "And some fixed gambling layouts."

"Perhaps." Cole waved his cigar. "But the important thing, for you, would be the protection you'd get from the King Cole Enterprises—very convenient, when the Civic League starts breathing down our necks. The League will never be able to buck an organization like ours is going to be."

"Like yours is going to be," Calderson corrected him flatly. "This town's hot enough as it is, Cole, without bringing in a crew of hired gun-slicks to throw oil on the fire." He let a chilled pause space his words, before adding: "I built my reputation here before you ever heard of Frontier, Cole. Keep the protection for yourself—you may need it."

"Wait a minute, friend!" Calderson was

turning away when he felt the restraining grip of Cole's hand on his coat sleeve. "Before you make this final," Cole said, "maybe you'd better think it over some more."

Deliberately, Calderson disengaged Cole's hand from his sleeve. He gave Cole a level, steady glance. "I don't need to think over a thing. I gave you my answer, Mister."

Cole's voice was deceptively mild. "All right," he said. "If you won't think of your own interest, maybe you'll think of your son's."

Calderson stiffened. "Clay has nothing to do with this. Nothing!"

Cole's eyes were withdrawn as he lighted the panetella. "No?" he murmured. "I wouldn't say that. He's Lew Akers' deputy now, isn't he? If things get rough, he might get hurt." He took a deep draw on the cigar, adding softly: "You might yourself."

Calderson's temper flared. "By God, if that's a threat, Cole, you'd better—"

He stopped suddenly. The gilded batwings of The Fiddlers Three had swung open and a burly, black-shirted figure wearing a tied-down holster moved out casually under the wooden awning. Calderson recognized Blackie Brott, a professional gunfighter who in recent weeks had been at Cole's coattails wherever he went. Brott stood tracked, his right hand hung close to the butt of his Colt, as Cole again picked up the conversation.

"Take it as a threat if you like," he told Calderson thinly. "But you may need help quicker than you think, after what happened last night at The Wheel."

"Whatever happens at The Wheel is my business, Cole." Calderson made an effort to conceal his surprise. He had left his saloon early the night before, and if there had been trouble, it was news to him: He shot a glance at Brott, adding: "Furthermore, when I do run into trouble, I don't need a hired gun-shark trotting at my heels to handle it for me."

Cole laughed mirthlessly. "Insurance, Calderson—just insurance. And if I were in your boots, I'd buy some of the same. Think about it. I'll give you twenty-four hours."

"And I'll give you just one second to hear my last word on this," Calderson flared. "It's no!"

WHEELING, he broke into his long-gaited stride, walking past Lever Brothers' Livery and the Drovers' house without awareness, seeing people, wagons moving up and down the street, through eyes befogged with the violence of his fury. He slackened his pace finally, controlling himself, his anger washing out under pressure of his renewed thoughts of Clay. Clay had been the one big mistake in his life, the irrevocable one.

Clay had been only seven years old when his mother had died and he had gone to live with Calderson's sister-in-law and her husband, Sara and Lew Akers. Calderson had not originally had any thought of letting this become a permanent arrangement. Through his own negligence, his blindness to what might happen, it had.

He had been only twenty-eight, still a comparatively young man, when Margaret had died, and much as he had loved his wife, he had always felt hobbled and uneasy under her straight-laced ways. He had bought the lot at Main and First where The Wheel Of Chance now stood a year before their marriage, but had never confided to her the kind of business he'd intended to establish there. The saloon had become a bitter bone of contention between them, but it had been their livelihood and despite her tearful pleadings he had stubbornly refused to sell it.

Then, a year after Margaret had passed on, he had met Florabelle Darcy, and had married her. Florabelle had been a show girl with a troupe of players making a one-night stand in Frontier, and he had become infatuated with her. She was a dark, vivacious slip of a girl, but with no more stability about her—as he had tragically discovered later—than a tumbleweed.

A hussy, Sara Akers had called her, when he had brought her with him to the Akers' home to meet Clay, and had refused to let her into the house. And six months later she had deserted him for a whiskey drummer.

In the years that had followed, the Wheel Of Chance had become the whole orbit of his life. Sara and Lew had drawn Clay closer to themselves after the failure of his second marriage, and, childless as they were, the boy had come to be like their own son to them.

He had seen no harm, then, in the care

and affection they had lavished on him. He could not give Clay a proper home and they could. He became a withdrawn and lonely man, pouring all of his time and energies into The Wheel, in an effort to forget.

Sara and Lew did not encourage his visits to their house, and he began to see Clay less and less frequently.

He woke up one day. The day he caught Clay, then only ten, engaged in a street fight with another kid his own age. Small fists flailing, Clay knocked the other boy down, then stood over him, panting, his face livid with rage, yelling: "Maybe he is my real Pa, but I don't live with him! I don't live at no saloon. I live in a reg'lar big house with my aunt and uncle, and you don't dast call me no more names or next time I'll kill you!"

He had turned away, sick, not blaming Lew and Sara, not blaming anyone or any one thing, in that moment of realization, but himself. Clay looked upon him as an interloper and an outsider, unworthy of the respect due a father from his son. And over the years, this feeling had hardened.

And now, with Frontier boiling with unrest and the lid threatening to blow off at any minute, Clay Calderson had given up his job with Jack Hardesty's big Step-H outfit, in the range country west of nearby Bitterroot, and was back in town, lined up with Marshal Lew Akers' new Civic League group, which was demanding a clean-up.

And Calderson knew that if it came to a showdown, the honest saloon-keepers and gamblers could not count on amnesty. In the heat of partisanship, an honest record would be forgotten or ignored.

Calderson didn't hear the sound of boot-heels tapping towards him until he was almost to the intersection, and then it was too late. Too late even if there had been an opportunity to duck into the nearest doorway, which was not his way.

The tall, lanky figure of the man with the star on his vest was less than a dozen paces from him when Calderson stopped and stood waiting. And knew, in some indefinable way, that it wasn't to be any good. Knew it was to be no different now than it had ever been, or would ever be.

Clay Calderson's eyes were a pale and frozen blue, staring straight ahead, past

him, and when Calderson spoke, jerking out his words with a choked abruptness, the man wearing the badge neither broke step nor deflected his gaze.

"Clay!" Calderson called. "Wait a minute! I want—"

At that moment—at the instant his hand clutched at his son's coat—he had the final, deadening knowledge that it was over, that the gulf was never to be bridged.

He felt the sleeve yanked from his grasp, felt his throat harden into an abrupt, dry lump. Then Clay Calderson was past him, plunging on with deliberate, long-reaching steps, ignoring him. Dan Calderson groaned, staring after his son's tall, spare figure with a sinking despair.

Why did he have to butt his head against a stone wall this way? *Because I'm a damned fool*, he answered himself, bitterly, savagely, and for a moment stood rooted to the boardwalk, feeling a little dazed and sick, as if a whip had been struck abruptly across his face.

For a long interval he didn't move, letting remorse and self-pity wash through him. Then, suddenly, he balled his right hand into a fist and smashed it into his open palm.

"To hell with it!" he muttered under his breath. "He'll wait a long day before I'll try *that* again."

He was still unconsciously whacking his fist into his palm as he swung around and started down the street again, feeling a slow, consuming anger within him now.

GUY HANNA, his floor boss, was seated behind the desk in the dim rear office of the Wheel Of Chance when Calderson entered the room. Hanna, a heavy, slow-moving man with bulky shoulders and phlegmatic gray eyes, had a copy of *The Frontier Weekly Citizen* opened before him. He put down the paper as Calderson came in and rocked back in his swivel chair.

"Been waiting for you, Dan," he said, as Calderson dropped his hat over an elkhorn rack and crossed to the desk. "Had a little trouble at the poker tables last night. Nothing," he added quickly, seeing Calderson's face darken, "that we can't handle, as long as we know what the score is."

"Heard there'd been some kind of a fuss." Calderson grunted, coming to a

halt in front of the desk. "Had to pick up the news from King Cole, of all people," he added moodily.

Hanna nodded. "Piece here in *The Citizen* about it—worse luck." He looked at Calderson, adding, "So Cole told you. Well, there's not much doubt of it, Dan—that's where our trouble's heading from. The Fiddlers. I heard this morning Cole's bought into Fessler's Elite, and there's a rumor around Rock Jorgenson's Big Betty will be in the pool in another day or two. That'll leave just Ad Ringgold, Arch Keppler—and us."

"Just Keppler and us, Guy. Ringgold's in." Calderson's tone flattened. "I just had a little boardwalk palaver with Mr. Big Augur himself. He gave me twenty-four hours to hop on the band wagon."

Hanna's voice inflected upward. "And if you don't?"

"He said," Calderson answered quietly, "he wouldn't want to see Clay get hurt."

Hanna lunged forward in the swivel chair, his lackluster eyes ablaze suddenly.

"The damned curly-hided *cabrón!*" he exploded.

"Clay," said Calderson, with deliberate harshness, "didn't have to pin that tin star on his vest. If he's bit off too big a hunk, let him spit it out." He avoided Hanna's eyes as he pulled up a chair and sat down, saying, "Now, what about this business of last night?"

Hanna heaved out a breath, relaxing back in the swivel chair. "I won't say I told you so, Dan. But you remember what I said when you hired Al Rumford."

Calderson stiffened. "Rumford? Al deals a straight game. I've watched him."

"You know our rule here, Dan. If a man's drunk, he stays out of the card room. Last night Rumford took Kirk Granger for five hundred. And Granger was high as a kite."

Irascibility edged Calderson's voice. "Then why the hell didn't you stop him?"

"Rumford's your dealer, Dan. Anyway, I was busy giving Ed Bucks a hand at the bar. We had a rush on—big trail drive in."

"You think Al would deal brace?" Calderson demanded. "He came here well recommended. That letter from Charlie Barker, in Abilene—"

"Was a forgery," Hanna cut in. "Char-

lie Barker was in town yesterday, visiting his brother Cy, and I happened to run into him. He told me he'd never even heard of anybody named Al Rumford."

Calderson took a smooth-worn silver dollar from the pocket of his vest—a coin he had carried for years as a good luck piece—and began flipping it up and down, into his palm. Hanna watched the familiar gesture. "You're nervous as a witch today," he said. "What about Granger, Dan? He's been to Lew Akers about this."

Calderson gave the good luck piece a final flip, caught it neatly, and tucked it back in his pocket.

"I'll see Akers this morning. Granger will get his money back. Every damned cent of it."

Hanna pushed back in the swivel chair and stood. "And what about Rumford?"

"He in yet?"

"No. But I told him you'd want to see him."

"I'll see him, all right."

Hanna reached the door, turned. "Take a tip, Dan. Fire him and let it go at that. Don't give Akers anything to come back at us on."

"He won't have. Neither will Rumford, when I'm through with him."

"You're the boss, Dan. But keep your bristles in. You may need 'em later—to use on Cole." And Hanna swung open the door and went out.

CHAPTER

Choke-Roped!

2

After Hanna had left, Calderson worked for an hour on his accounts, but found himself unable to concentrate on the figures.

First Clay, then King Cole. And now Al Rumford. He frowned down at the opened ledger on his desk, his lips pursed thoughtfully. Cole and his "Enterprises" constituted the major problem, of course, but all of these names were now interlocked, for him, to spell trouble. Would Cole, he wondered, really try to get at him, through the kid?

Calderson rose suddenly, slamming the ledger shut and walking to the door. The long, low-ceilinged gambling parlor outside his office was deserted and still in disorder from the play of the night before.

A cloying odor of stale tobacco smoke and coal oil clung to the place. It looked dreary, in the pale morning light. Calderson crossed through into the barroom.

Four men were at the bar, but Calderson recognized only one—Jim Sturdevent, who worked at the livery, opposite the hotel. The others had the look of trail hands, just in from a drive. Guy Hanna and Ed Bucks stood together at the deep end of the bar, Bucks polishing glasses. About to turn towards them, Calderson halted suddenly as the front batwings flapped open and Al Rumford walked in.

For a brief moment Rumford stood just inside the doorway, his glance pausing speculatively on the three trail hands stationed near the door end of the bar. Then he looked up and saw Calderson and a faintly startled expression spread in his quick, dark eyes.

"Al," Calderson called softly. "I want to see you."

Rumford was coming towards him then, a tall, thin-boned man with a hawk-narrow face and a sprig of black mustache twisted into glossy waxed spikes at the edges of his upper lip.

He's got sneaky eyes, Calderson thought, and wondered at his own gullibility. Anyone could palm off a hard-luck story on him. Plenty had. He was known as an easy touch, in Frontier. Now, the thought of this honed his temper to a sharp and ready edge, and as Rumford halted in front of him, he felt it flare despite Guy Hanna's warning to keep himself under control.

"Al," he demanded abruptly, "what about Kirk Granger? Was he drunk last night?"

"Drunk?" Rumford's eyes were withdrawn, wary, suddenly. The pause was too long before he said, with a glib pretense of candor, "Why, he might have had a few. But he could walk straight enough. Who said he was drunk?"

"Guy Hanna," Calderson said, and felt his restraint slipping as he watched Rumford's eyes dart furtively towards the corner where Hanna stood, talking with Ed Bucks. "Never mind Hanna now!" he barked, as Rumford's glance jerked back to him, forced by the sharp anger in his voice. "I know Kirk Granger," he went on flatly. "He's no plunger. He wouldn't have gone overboard to the tune of five

hundred dollars if he hadn't been drunk."

Rumford's eyes thinned into sullenness. "I told you he'd had a few. But he knew what he was doing. You can take my word—"

"*Your word,*" Calderson interrupted him, with ripping sarcasm. "Your word's about as good as a lick of salt to a man with an alkali'd throat! You faked that letter from Charlie Barker, didn't you?" His voice thickened, pounded at Rumford with a sudden savage vehemence. "Well, don't just stand there like a damned dummy!" he exploded. "Spit it out, if it's the truth!"

The color in Rumford's high cheekbones drained to a sickly pallor. "But—but it's not the truth. I swear to it, Mr. Calderson! Maybe Charlie Barker don't remember, but—"

The guilt was on his face, in the sudden clear panic in his eyes, and Calderson's anger leaped into a full and ungovernable rage.

With no warning, his hand shot out, cuffing Rumford across the face, and then, as the gambler recoiled, his mouth hanging open in a foolish look of shock, Calderson put the full weight of his heavy shoulders into a slugging blow that caught Rumford flush on the mouth and sent him reeling back, coughing blood.

At the same instant he heard Ed Bucks' warning cry from the bar: "Boss! Look out!" and saw Rumford's hand dart to the pocket of his black jacket. Rumford had the snubby derringer half out of the pocket when Calderson rammed into him, gripping Rumford's gun wrist with his left hand and smashing his right in a slogging clout to the gambler's undershot jaw.

As Rumford sagged, Calderson caught him by the arm and dragged him along the floor, heels bumping, to the door. There, with one hand gripping his jacket collar and the other the seat of his pants, he flung him through the batwings out onto the boardwalk.

The three trail drivers were watching him with a faint amusement, Jim Sturdevent with a frowning impassivity, as he swung around, patting the rumple out of his clothes.

Then Guy Hanna was coming down the bar rail towards him, and suddenly Calder-

son had the usual let-down feeling that always followed these outbreaks of temper, seeing the judging disapproval in Hanna's eyes.

"I'll admit," said Hanna quietly, stopping in front of him, "that he had that coming. But you didn't have to do it so it'll be all over Frontier in half an hour."

"Why not?" Calderson answered angrily. "It's all over town about Granger. Maybe this'll be an antidote."

"Maybe." Guy Hanna's tone was dry. "And maybe it'll be the fuse that'll explode the powder keg."

"Poppycock! Just because I did a job Lew Akers would have had to do himself, sooner or later?" Calderson started for the game parlor, brusquely motioning for Hanna to follow him. "Come on," he said, with mounting impatience. "We'll get that check ready for Granger. When I walk in this town, I like to do it with my head up!"

UNDER the spread of light from his table lamp—on the evening of the following day—Dan Calderson stared down uneasily at the note the desk clerk had just delivered to his room. Peculiar, Arch Keppler wanting to see him at this hour of the night. He glanced at his silver stem-winder, canted against an ash tray at the edge of the lamp table. One-thirty. But then, hours meant nothing to a saloon-keeper, although Keppler's small place was usually closed, by this hour.

Calderson smoothed out the note and holding it closer to the lamp carefully read it again:

Dan:

I've got to see you—tonight. Can you be at my place between one-thirty and two? I'll wait for you. I'll be locked up out front, so come to the back door. Guess you know what I want to talk about. Better burn this note.

Arch.

A slow frown built on Calderson's lean-featured face as he thoughtfully refolded the note and tucked it into his pocket. Then, on a second thought, he walked to the chest of drawers beside his bed and concealed the note within the folds of a freshly laundered shirt. Maybe he'd just hold on to that, for a while.

Not that he mistrusted Arch Keppler. Except for himself and Arch, all the others

in their line of business in Frontier had been buffaloes into the new King Cole combine, some grudgingly, others welcoming Cole's "protective" leadership.

But the angle that puzzled him about this was the strange note of urgency in Keppler's message. *I've got to see you—tonight.* In the last couple days, he had talked with Arch Keppler only once about King Cole's scheme, and then only casually, during a chance encounter on the street. Keppler's inclination at that time had been the same as his own, to mind his own business and see to it that others minded theirs.

The owner of the Keno Cafe, like himself, was a man who liked to turn his own furrow. Had something drastic come up, to bring such a sudden and curious change in Keppler's attitude? And Keppler was a blunt and open man. Why, then, had he made such a point of asking him to burn the note? What was he afraid of?

Moving to the window, Calderson took makings from his pocket and absently began shaping up a cigarette. The twenty-four hour deadline King Cole had given him was now long past. Nothing had happened, yet. Was this the calm before the storm?

He scratched a match alight and put it to the tip of the cigarette, recalling his interview with Lew Akers, the day before.

Calderson had been unable to find Kirk Granger, and finally had gone to the marshal's office, to leave the check he had for him there.

"I figured you'd be along with this, Dan," Akers had told him sincerely, then had shaken his head in a slow, somber way, adding, "Sorry, though, to hear about that ruckus you had with Al Rumford. Bad business, Dan, damned bad business."

"Mine," Calderson had answered flatly, and then, looking down at the marshal's seamed and aging face, his tone had altered. "Guess there's no use trying to teach an old dog new tricks, Lew."

Lew Akers tipped back in his swivel chair, knitting his hands together in back of his head, his mild, gray-blue eyes tilted up at Calderson.

"Why don't you get out of it, Dan?" he asked quietly. "You've made your pile. Buy a spread for you and Clay. You could—"

Calderson's voice chopped through his

words with a bitter vehemence. "Are you serious, Lew? Clay passed me on the street this morning. Cut me dead."

"He's got your stubbornness, Dan—that's why he's here. For his own sake, I didn't want him for this job. But he and Noley Hicks both applied. The Town Council voted for Clay—four to one." Lew Akers sighed. "They got the better man."

Calderson's sarcasm was forced. "What do you want me to do . . . cheer?"

"No," Akers said gently. "No, but I'd like to see you meet the boy half way, Dan. He—"

"Half way! I met him all the way this morning. And he wouldn't budge an inch."

"Change your colors, Dan. Buy a ranch and get out of the saloon business. You'd see a difference then."

Calderson wrenched out the words savagely. "I knew there'd be a catch in it. There always has been."

"Dan," Akers said, emotion swelling his voice, "when I hang up my guns Clay will be the next marshal of Frontier—unless you stop him."

"I run an honest business, Lew. There's no stink to it in my nose."

Akers dropped his hands from in back of his head and rocked forward in his swivel chair.

"If you live long enough with a bad smell, Dan, you don't notice it. But that doesn't say it's not there." Hardness came into his voice. "It's there," he went on deliberately, "and you can't keep the vermin away from it if you want to. You can't set enough traps to catch all the rats. And finally the town has to order in the exterminator."

"Lew Akers, the fighting gun marshal," Calderson said bitterly.

Akers ignored the sarcasm. "Dan," he said, "this town is red-hot—you know that. The Civic League means business. We're watching that new outfit King Cole's been setting up here . . . don't think we're not. Let him step over the line—just once—and the fireworks start." He paused, adding heavily, "And he's going to step over, Dan. When he does, keep away from it. I'm telling you this now. Get involved, and you'll get no soft deal from this office."

"I wouldn't expect one," Calderson said, picking up his hat. Then, at the door, he had turned, grinning back meagerly at

Lew Akers's solemn eyes. "This is one for the book, Lew," he had said then, with a hollow laugh. "This is one time I'm on your side. Dan Calderson, the gambler, lined up with the blue noses! Never thought I'd live to see the day," he'd added, and had opened the door and walked out. . . .

BUT now, as he stood in his bare hotel room, staring down at the spread of light from The Fiddlers Three, he knew it wasn't amusement he had felt that day in Lew Akers' office, but a slow, dawning comprehension of the truth. He had made a joke of his position, but the joke had been a sham.

For the first time in his life, he was aligned with forces he had always belittled. He had drawn the line himself, that morning he had rejected King Cole's offer of an alliance. Now he was in this up to his neck, and by the force of ironical circumstance, on Lew Akers' side.

Suddenly, at this moment, he knew he had no choice but to respond to Arch Keppler's note—find out what pressing development could have prompted Keppler's request for a meeting. And what could have caused Keppler to sound so urgent about it.

He picked up his gunbelt and strapped it around his waist. Then, snuffing out the light, he picked up his hat and went to the door.

Reaching the boardwalk, he turned downstreet, picking up his pace as he came to lengthy patches of darkness between saloon lights, which were the only ones burning at this hour. Lew Akers was right about one thing. This town was getting red-hot. Hot as a pistol. Any man was a fool to be on the street at this hour of the night, if he didn't have to be.

Ahead of him now, Calderson saw the spread of light from the curtained windows of The Wheel Of Chance, and reaching the saloon's door, turned in from the boardwalk on a sudden impulse and went in. Maybe it would be just as well if he told Guy Hanna where he was bound. Keppler's Keno was only a few doors farther downstreet. If he ran into any trouble, it might not be a bad idea if Hanna knew where he could be located.

He found Hanna in the gambling alcove,

running the games tonight in the absence of Al Rumford, and motioning him to a corner, quickly told him about the note and of his plan to see Keppler.

"Well," Hanna told him, when he had finished his story, "I don't guess there'd be any harm in your talking with Kep. Cole's got all the other boys either choked or feeding out of his hand. Better watch your step though, Dan. Lew and Clay are keeping a tight watch on things tonight." He jerked his head slightly. "Look over your shoulder."

Calderson looked—and saw Clay. His eyes tightened, swinging back on Guy Hanna.

"What's he doing here?"

"Now take it easy, Dan. He's just doing his job. We had trouble here a couple nights ago . . . remember?"

"Trouble we could handle ourselves—and did," Calderson replied flatly. "Tell him if he's looking for a brace game, to try The Fiddlers Three."

"Lay off him, Dan. The kid's doing his job—as he sees it."

"As *he* sees it." Calderson's voice sounded like a rasp scraping across steel. "Clay never saw anything straight in his life," he said, and wheeling abruptly, made his way to the front door, a savage anger tearing through him.

When he was only two doors from Arch Keppler's place, he checked his stride suddenly. The Keno was dark in front, the hitch rack empty. Then he remembered. Keppler had told him he'd be locked up out front, to come to the back door.

Cautiously, Calderson glanced quickly up and down the street, then, seeing nothing suspicious, left the boardwalk and plunged into the darkened alley between Harve Roberts' feed store and the Elite Mercantile. Presently, emerging in the rear yard of the mercantile, he stood tracked a moment, studying the ground around him and feeling a faint sheepishness, now, about his reconnoitering approach.

Just beyond the Elite, he could see a murky spread of light from a back window of Arch Keppler's office. Keppler's yard, as well as that of the Elite, was littered with stacks of boxes and empty packing cases, but the whole area appeared deserted, and a faint breeze made the only sound, rustling the leaves of a big cottonwood,

growing just midway between the yards.

CALDERSON paced forward watchfully, annoyed by his stubborn circumspection, yet reluctant still to let it go from him completely. At that instant, from somewhere near by, came the muffled pound of a shot and Calderson froze in his tracks, staring intently forward, towards the rear door of The Keno. For a thin-spun moment an utter stillness prevailed, and he began to wonder if he had judged the sound correctly. It could have been the slamming of a door. Or—

Calderson's split-second of indecision threw off his timing. He had only a fleeting glimpse of the shadowy figure stepping out from the back door of The Keno. Simultaneously, a wink of flame split the darkness and the harsh detonation of a six-gun rapped at the silence.

The bullet whistled as Calderson threw himself behind a stack of rubbish, hitting a can a ridiculous distance to his left and sending it bouncing away with an empty clatter. The inept gun-slinger lurched into a clumping run, and was half-blotted by shadows as Calderson pumped one shot from his Colt and knew that he had missed. In the time it took him to catch his breath and climb to his feet his quarry was gone, and short seconds later, at he advanced warily toward the back door of The Keno, hoofbeats built to a rhythmic pounding in the night quiet, then faded out swiftly into remoteness.

Reaching the door, Calderson hesitated briefly. He had, now, an overwhelming certainty of what he would find, when he stepped across this threshold. Arch Keppler, dead. Arch, with a bullet through his head.

It was clear, now, that Arch had never written the note that had called him here. But King Cole had wanted him on the spot, had wanted him to see the brand of medicine he dispensed to hold-outs and malcontents. A sure cure, insuring a swift and permanent relief from the pains of indecision. Arch was to be an object lesson—for his benefit. Either that, or Cole's man had intended getting him too, but had miscued on his timing.

The door was half open, and with a guarded readiness, Calderson stepped into a narrow corridor. To his left, another

door, shut, showed a crack of light above its sill. Gun out, Calderson thumbed down on the latch, pushing it gently inward.

A lighted lamp stood on a roll-topped desk in a corner of the room, throwing its yellow cone of light downward, upon the motionless shape sprawled below it on the floor.

Calderson's boots made a hollow tapping, crossing the room. As he stood in front of the desk, staring down, a cold and sterile anger held him momentarily rigid. Then, with a sighing weariness, he stooped, gingerly rolling the body over to a face-up position.

At the same instant, his eyes went blank with shock. The dead man was not Arch Keppler. The dark, saturnine face of the man on the floor—was that of Al Rumford!

CHAPTER

Hangnoose Pattern

3

For a moment, Dan Calderson remained crouched beside the sprawled, motionless figure, staring with a kind of dazed fascination at the powder-blackened puncture in Rumford's right temple. Blood was still oozing out of the ragged fissure. Calderson hoisted himself erect finally, struggling to break the log-jam of confusion in his brain and bring his thoughts into some semblance of coherence.

By all the rules of logic, the man lying on the floor there, dead, should be Arch Keppler. Keppler was important. Al Rumford was a no-account, a drifter and saddlebum. The pattern was all wrong, out of focus completely. It was preposterous—unless Cole had made an incredible slip-up. Unless Cole, or whoever he had sent to do this job, had sent that bullet into Al Rumford's head in the mistaken belief that his victim was Arch Keppler.

But both Cole and Blackie Brott knew Keppler. How could they have made such a mistake? What could have brought Rumford here tonight—and at the very hour when the trap was set and ready to be sprung?

Calderson was still staring down at the man on the floor when a step sounded behind him, and he spun around, too mentally befogged, still, to be ready with his weapon. The slim, erect figure standing in the doorway had a gun though, and it was leveled

right at him like a stiffly-accusing finger.

"So beating him up wasn't good enough for you," the man with the gun said. "You had to kill him."

Calderson froze, staring up blankly into his son's cold, stiff-set eyes.

"Clay!" he blurted hoarsely. "What the devil are you talking about?"

"You," Clay answered, "and Al Rumford. Jim Sturdevent witnessed that fight you had with him." He advanced watchfully into the room, keeping Calderson covered.

A flash of light seemed to explode in Dan Calderson's brain. The fake message from Arch Keppler that had brought him here. Finding Rumford dead instead of Keppler—Keppler with whom he'd never quarreled. It all tied in. The pattern was plain, now. The pattern of a hangnoose—designed by King Cole to fit just one neck. His!

"Clay," said Calderson, keeping his voice even with a deliberate effort, "if you think I killed this man, you're out of your head. I came here because I got a note. The note was a fake."

"I heard a shot," Clay snapped out. "From over at The Wheel. Maybe you haven't had time to jack out the empty. I'd like a look at that gun you're toting."

Dismay stabbed Calderson. His gun! It still had that one dead shell in it, from the shot he'd fired at the killer. Fear washed out of him, vented on a swift surge of anger.

"Damn it," he exploded, "if you want this gun you'll have to—"

A voice spoke quietly from the doorway, "Better lay your hardware down on that desk, Clay. I'd plumb hate to do it, but I'll shoot it out of your fist if I have to."

Even as he jerked around, Calderson heard the gun clump down. Then he saw Guy Hanna. Hanna stood spraddle-legged in the doorway, his own iron vised in his right fist, his cool, level gray eyes aimed unwaveringly at Clay.

"I might have known," Clay threw at him with a tight bitterness. "Two of a kind! But you'll find the law's bigger than either one of you."

"Sure, kid, sure," Hanna said in his dry and easy voice. "Big thing, the law. But we'll let Lew Akers look into this, before we go off half-cocked. Any of us." He said

to Calderson, "Dan, why don't you sashay over to The Wheel and wait for us there? Clay and I'll hunt up Lew, and then we can have a four-handed confab on this. Clay," he added in mild rebuke, "might get to know his old man a little better, if *he* let him speak his piece without a gun poking him in the ribs."

"Clay don't want to know me," retorted Calderson harshly. "Afraid a little saloon dirt might rub off on his lily-white hands." He strode to the door, then halted, his bitter glance striking back at Clay Calderson's reddened face. "It's plumb amazing," he said with heavy scorn, "what a noble character you turned out to be, with a black sheep like me for your old man."

Hanna said sharply, "Shut up, Dan. Trouble with you two is, you're a cut of the same leather, and it's too damned tough to bend. Now wait for us at the office, Dan. No more shenanigans tonight."

"This business," Calderson said stubbornly, "has got to be settled tonight, Guy. Once and for all."

"All right," Hanna conceded, "tonight then. But don't get any fool notion you can handle it lone-handed."

Calderson gave him a bleak glance. "So far I don't seem so good at that, do I? Watch the cub, Guy," he murmured, and went out.

BACK on the boardwalk, heading up street, he felt his resolution to do something about this now falter briefly. Should he follow Hanna's suggestion and wait at his office for Lew Akers? Common sense told him that he should. But there were times when a compulsion stronger than sense or reason drove a man.

He remembered, now, the blunt warning Akers had given him. *Keep away from it. Get involved, and you'll get no soft deal from this office.* Well, he was involved, he was in it as deep as a man could get. But if he didn't follow his hunch tonight—*now*—the opportunity to catch King Cole by surprise would be lost. And it was his hunch that the man he had shot at back at The Keno—Blackie Brott, probably—would be at Cole's place at this very minute, making his report. *Why dilly-dally?* Calderson thought. *Why not strike while the iron's hot?*

He realized suddenly that his long-gaited

stride had brought him to within a block of The Fiddlers Three. He slackened his pace. There was still time for cooler judgment.

But why should he stay clear? Who'd give a damn if anything happened to him? Guy Hanna, perhaps. But not his own flesh and blood. Not Clay. Bitterness clamped a hard, choking dryness around his throat.

Clay wasn't real. Clay was a dream that had faded with the years, and now the dream was dead, lost forever.

Calderson was roused abruptly from his preoccupation by a hullabaloo of voices, mingled with the tiny rataplan of a piano rattling out the melody of *The Girl I Left Behind Me*. He stopped, faintly startled by the realization that he was standing in front of King Cole's gaudy palace.

At two o'clock, horses still stood flank to flank at the long hitch rack outside the place. Cole, Calderson considered, must be doing a land-office business, and tonight that suited his purposes exactly. He'd be just one more merry-maker lost in the shuffle of that crowd in there. And he doubted if any of Cole's crew knew him, with the exception of Blackie Brott.

A grim tightness flattened his mouth momentarily. Then he pushed open the gilded batwings and stepped inside.

The huge hall was a bedlam of clatter and confusion. Calderson found himself in a crush bearing toward the bar, and had to elbow himself away from it. Beyond the bar, he observed now, was a stage and dance hall, but the curtain was down, the last show of the night apparently over. Directly across from the bar was a long game room, luxuriously set apart from the barroom by heavy velvet drapes, drawn partially open.

Calderson swung his glance to the dance hall, where a high cut-glass chandelier sprayed down its light upon a smoke-fogged scene of revelry. A bald-headed piano player was working industriously over his keyboard, while above him, standing on the piano, a girl with the haggardness rouged from her face tapped time with her high-heeled slippers to the rhythm of his melody, carrying the air of *Bird In A Gilded Cage* in a high, brassy voice.

Other girls, still in their flounced ballet dresses and spangled bodices, were jiggling around the floor in the arms of rough-

garbed men who grinned sheepishly under their provocative cuddling, but who, Calderson knew, would be easy victims for their fleeing, later.

He walked to the doorway of the dance hall, keeping close to the fringe of the crowd lining the long bar. There, halted just inside the big room, he studied the ornately balustraded staircase leading to the railed gallery, above. At the top of the stairway was a corridor, the only one visible, from where he stood. Was Cole's office somewhere along that?

Moving with the aimlessness of a man just idling around, Calderson reached the foot of the stairway. Then, with a swift glance back across his shoulder, he started up it.

Reaching the landing, he looked down, but no one seemed to have noticed him, or if they had, appeared too busy with their merrymaking to give him a second thought. The corridor was shallow, dim. Six feet in from the landing it ended against a closed door. Through an opened transom above it Calderson distinctly caught a sound of voices.

He took a last quick look downward, over the landing balustrade, then turned and sauntered into the corridor. Once in the tiny hall and out of view, he moved stealthily up to the door and halted. He had no difficulty, now, in identifying King Cole's voice, speaking to Blackie Brott.

"I'll admit," Cole was saying, "that it seemed a bit complicated the first time I thought about it. About the easiest part was getting that fake message to Rumford, saying Keppler wanted to see him about a job at The Keno. But the rest went off okay, eh?"

"Smooth as butter," Calderson heard Brott answer smugly. "I popped a shot over Calderson's head going out—just so he'd slap one back at me and have an empty in his wheel when that fool kid deputy found him. And you didn't have to worry about Sime Turley. Sime had the kid all primed with that phoney tip about troublemaking up over at The Wheel. Then he hid out in that old feed shack across the street—just in case the kid started in the wrong direction when the fireworks went off."

"Which he didn't," Cole said. "You're sure of that, Blackie?"

"Sime's downstairs now," Blackie reported. "He hung around long enough for a look-see through a back alley window into Keppler's office. Saw the kid get the drop on his old man. It's open-and-shut, Boss—everybody knows about that grudge fight Calderson had with Rumford, at The Wheel."

A PAUSE fell as Calderson stood flattened against the wall beside the door, tensed, ready for the moment when boot-heels would tap across the floor in there, and the door would swing open. How much longer would he have to wait?

Brott's gritty-sounding voice ended the pause now. "We still got Keppler to think about though. Maybe we should have strapped him on his horse, while we was at it."

"Don't be a fool!" Cole rejoined sharply. "Why do you think I tolled Calderson to The Keno in the first place? When Keppler hears what happened in his back office tonight, he'll see the handwriting on the wall. He'll come begging for us to take him in." He allowed a pause to sink in, before adding, "So naturally we oblige the new member . . . on *our* terms."

"A plumb handsome arrangement too: our guaranteed protection for a measly half interest in The Keno." Brott guffawed, and as the sound rasped on Calderson's ears there came another that he had been half expecting and dreading—a click of boot-heels, on the staircase.

Alarm pounded through him as he spun around. It was an even money bet that the man coming up the stairs would be Sime Turley. And there were no doors off this corridor except the one into Cole's private office. The footfalls grew menacingly louder. A blocky shadow loomed out of the corridor's dimness.

Now Calderson's hand was on the door-knob. He let it fall away idly, as if he had just shut the door. He turned and took two steps, blessing the darkness, then, in counterfeit surprise, came to an abrupt halt.

"Sime!" he muttered, as if only now aware of the thick-set figure blocking his way. He gripped the man's arm, urgently, swinging him around, whispering close to his ear: "One of the girls in there. Come back later."

"Oh! Lola? But I thought . . ." The man beside Calderson had started back towards

the stairway. Suddenly he stopped, jerking his head around. "Hey, wait a minute!" he blurted out abruptly. "Who the devil are—"

They were not quite to the landing when Calderson lifted on his toes and hacked down with his gun barrel, chopping it viciously across the man's right temple. The man crumpled, and the savage swing sent Calderson rocking past him, off balance. He landed on his knees in a bruising sprawl, faced towards the stairway; and for an instant remained crouched and half stunned, forcing air into his lungs in shallow, gasping breaths. A freezing paralysis gripped him as the door to Cole's office creaked open and Blackie Brott's gravely voice nicked at the silence.

"That you, Sime? What the devil's going on out here?"

A spark of hope leaped in Calderson. "Some—somebody sneaking up the stairs," he gasped out faintly.

As Brott came forward, Calderson lunged to his feet and whirled around. The violence

of his spin arrested Brott's stooping movement over the sprawled figure of Sime Turley: He allowed the burly gun-slinger no time to get set fully, nor did he have time himself. He butted at Brott like a battering ram, at the same moment grabbing a fistful of his shirt and uppercutting him savagely under the jaw. He felt Brott's head jerk back, and then Brott had him in a clinch, and he heaved violently, slamming the big gun-shark back against the wall.

The slackened pressure of Brott's arms around his waist was only momentary. Loose plaster showered from the wall as Brott banged heavily against it, but he rebounded from it, hitting Calderson with the force of a catapult. At the same instant he drove his knee at Calderson's groin, and staggered in pursuit as Calderson reeled backward onto the landing.

A blinding rage seized Calderson and as the pain in his belly lulled, he set himself. Gripping Brott's wrist, he packed all the power of his heavy frame into a prodigious heave that sent Brott pitching towards him

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like a floundering fish. He let go abruptly then and snaked out his left foot.

A look of dumb astonishment froze Brott's face as he tripped and was flung forward over the gallery railing. And as the gunman arced over, Calderson slugged down at the drooping head with his gun.

The shot from the corridor made a room-trapped detonation, a sound like a muffled drum beat pounding against the sudden screams and confused uproar swelling up from the smoky well of the dance floor, below. "Calderson heard it with a curious sense of detachment as he slumped, feeling pain gout excruciatingly upward through his left side. Sprawled flat on his stomach, with numbness stealing through him, Calderson had only a fuzzy awareness of the tall, elegantly groomed figure of King Cole sauntering to the head of the stairs, the derringer still clamped in his right hand.

I bucked the odds, Calderson thought remotely, and the odds are always with the house. . . .

The thought drifted lazily away from him as he managed to roll his head and glance downward, his mind foggy now, hovering on the rim of unconsciousness. Below, a lanky figure wearing a blue shirt had broken through the crowd milling around the newel post and was starting up the stairs with slow, deliberate steps. King Cole was three steps down when he suddenly lifted the derringer.

After that, things had no credibility, no reality, for Calderson. The two shots were spaced so closely that they seemed to make a single blast—a sound that beat at the hubbub from below like a stunning explosion.

With a last thin spark of awareness, Calderson saw Cole topple backward against the balustrade, then go sliding down, like a log on a greased skidway. The figure in the blue shirt was coming on up the stairs, and at that moment Calderson knew, it was all an hallucination—a grim trick of his delirium. For the face of the man was the face of his son, Clay.

No, it wasn't Clay. Couldn't be. Because Clay wasn't real, either. He was an illusion, a spent dream. Calderson made a mighty effort and tried to call out his name. It made no difference that he could not. The face was slipping away from him now,

THE TINHORN PISTOLEERS!

fading like a will-o'-the-wisp. A soft and velvety blackness was coming down, enveloping it. Then the blackness was reaching for him and he was glad when it did, because when the lights go out and night falls it is time for a man to go home. . . .

THE long days were a weary round of tired hours and padded footsteps and hushed voices, all inextricably mingled. At times, Calderson had the feeling of faces hung about him, like pictures on a wall, but the eyes in the faces were always blank and meaningless, and he never recognized them. Oddly, though, the voices had a vague familiarity, and sometimes he imagined he was hearing Lew Akers and Guy Hanna, and once, Clay.

Afterward, when the voices had died away, Calderson discovered that he could sometimes remember snatches of phrases and sentences.

Once it had been Lew Akers' voice, saying: "Well, now Cole's passed in his chips, and we got Turley and Brott off to the tules, reckon we can turn Frontier back to the founders. And say what you like about the business he was in, Dan Calderson was one of the rocks this town was built on."

"And Clay's a chip off that rock." That had been Guy Hanna's quiet, matter-of-fact voice. "Sure thought I had the deadwood on the boy, that night at The Keno, but he jumped me quicker'n you can say scat. And a plumb lucky thing, Lew, he took that notion to head straight for Cole's, without waiting for you."

"The youngster's got plenty sand in his craw—nobody can deny that. What's the latest from the Doc, Guy?"

"Doc says he'll make it, Lew. But it'll take three, four months of rest and sun and plenty of fresh air before he'll feel mean enough to whip any more wildcats."

Just once, through the semi-coma which dulled his vision and blunted his perceptions, Calderson remembered hearing Clay's voice. Lew Akers was in the room then, and Akers was saying: "It's the old Lukens place, up back of Shelter Mountain. I took an option on it. Now all we got to do is pound a little sense in his head—soon as he's feelin' peart enough to set up."

"He'll never buy that option from you, Lew." Clay's voice was flatly opinionative.

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"Besides, I found out something that night at The Fiddlers—something I've been too damned hidebound to admit to anybody, until now. You don't measure a man by his head, but by his heart."

Then came the morning of miracle—the morning when he awoke with a faintly startled sensation to see sunlight pouring brilliantly through the window of his room, tinting every familiar object with a bright and golden clarity.

He felt clear-headed, alive, his mind amazingly keen and alert as memory came flooding back. That night at The Fiddlers Three. He's gun-whipped Sime Turley and Blackie Brott, and then. . . .

The door to his room swung open and a dark, pretty girl with the clearest blue eyes Calderson had ever seen stepped across the threshold, carrying a tray. She put down the tray on the table beside his bed, smiling at him.

"I guess you won't be needing me much longer," she told him, and took a napkin from a plate of hot buttered toast. "Smells good, doesn't it?" she said, sniffing the toast. "Doctor Penrose ordered this last night, when your fever broke. Said we could give you a real man-sized breakfast, this morning. There's a soft-boiled egg hidden in this other dish—see?" and she lifted the cover from a tiny platter.

Calderson stared down at the tray, then up at the girl. "You—you've been the nurse here?" he muttered finally. "Don't guess I've had a very clear notion of what's been going on around me these last couple days."

"I've helped out a little." The girl's voice was faintly deprecating. She went to the foot of the bed and returned with another pillow, gently helping him to raise himself as she propped it neatly behind his head. "I'm Molly Lukens," she told him, then, and put the tray on his lap. "Clay will be here any minute now. I want you to eat every snitch of that food, before he arrives."

The toast and egg tasted good, the hot coffee better still. Calderson ate with relish while Molly Lukens bustled around the room, putting it in order. Then he knew why he was staring at her so.

She put him in mind of Margaret. Molly Lukens. He remembered now. Ed Lukens, her father, had died six months ago, and their spread had been put on the market. A

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mighty fine location. Had a spring-fed pond on it, and plenty of good graze.

Calderson stiffened suddenly. Words rang in his head, words he vaguely associated, somehow, with Lew Akers. *It's the old Lukens place, up back of Shelter Mountain. I took an option on it. And then something else, something somebody else had said. He'll never buy that option from you, Lew.* Clay! Clay had said that. . . .

And then Clay was speaking again. He stood on the threshold of the door and spoke the word Calderson had never expected to hear again. He said, "Hello, Dad," and the greeting brought a sudden tight knot in Calderson's throat as he came into the room and advanced to the bed, gripping his hand. "How's Molly been treating you?" he asked, and swung his glance to Molly Lukens. And as their eyes met, Calderson knew. He and Margaret had looked at each other once in that same way. A long time ago. Or was it—yesterday?

Calderson answered now. "Like a daughter," he said. "Like the daughter I always hoped to have, Clay, some day."

Clay flushed. "You must have a crystal ball stashed under those pillows, Dad."

Calderson laughed, and felt a restlessness stirring through him. "Anybody can see through a clear pane of glass, son."

Up under Shelter Mountain the trees would be budding, the grass getting soft and green. And in the years that had flown by since Clay was a button, he'd made all the money any man needed. Hanna would be glad to own The Wheel.

Looking up into the shining faces of Clay and Molly Lukens, Calderson's voice was suddenly sharp. "Clay, I want you to hunt up Lew Akers and fetch him here. I've got a bone to pick with that old dog!"

Clay looked down at him, startled. "Why, Lew's been dropping in every day, Dad. He—"

"I want to see him right away," Calderson interrupted fiercely. A pleasant languor was reaching through him. He dropped his head back on the pillows, feeling a bit tired suddenly. "Tell Lew," he got out faintly, "it's about an option I want to buy. And tell him if he's got any notion he can skin me out of it, he'd better have his fool head examined!"



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(Continued from page 34)

cause Wild Sam is long gone from Mon-
tana.

A LONG sigh went up in the Bison sa-
loon. Garth Gaston had been listening
with half a sneer all the way. He broke out
with an ugly laugh. "You tell 'em real
spooky, mister," he snapped. "But I'm
a little sad to tell it wasn't good enough.
Get those legs limbered up. You've got a
chore to do!"

The old drifter's blue eyes glittered.
They got colder and colder and he seemed
to straighten up out of his stoop. He swept
back the tattered ends of his long coat. You
could see the twin Peacemakers hanging
low on his hips. He looked Gaston over
close, an ugly grin hanging on his face.

"Take that gun off the bar," he said, his
voice real quiet and patient-sounding, but
so icy the chills went up my back. "Take
the gun off the bar and show the boys how
I do a regular old high-steppin' prance.
Well—get to it, big wind, and back that
big yap!"

Looking a little worried, Garth Gaston
glanced around like he wished somebody
would help him out. Everybody waited,
glad that they weren't dealt in.

"Come on, come on," the old drifter
purred, his hands closer to the deadly-look-
ing Peacemakers. "Don't show the boys
your rabbit guts!"

Gaston laughed shakily. "Just havin' a
little fun with you, oldtimer. I didn't—"

"Take that gun off the bar!" the old
drifter screamed and everybody jumped.
His eyes were burning like a madman's,
and he was dead white. Right then we got
an idea of how Johnny Prescott felt look-
ing at him over the poker table.

Gaston swallowed hard a couple of times
and suddenly slunk out of the door, not
even looking back.

The old drifter shrank back in his clothes,
and let the coattails hide the Peacemakers.
He seemed humble again and looked up at
me kind of pleading-like.

"Story tellin' gets me a little dry," he
said softly. He pointed at the bar bottle.
"Can I have another drink?"

I nodded.

He took the bottle, reaching over the big
bonehandled sixgun still on the bar. ● ● ●

GUNMAN'S WELCOME

(Continued from page 75)

accused me of turnin' yellow. Rankin told me to get out of the country. Now you tell me! All right, I'll go. I had a lot of crazy kid dreams about the Flyin' T. I'm glad you've killed 'em for me—quick!"

His bitter words tore the anger out of him, leaving only a hollow sickness. Again he extended his hand, and again his father took it without getting up.

"Dad . . ." Bill choked.

"So long, Bill," Ed Taylor said slowly.

BILL reached the stable without being aware of the steps he had taken. Savagely he threw the saddle on his bay horse, yanked the cinch tight.

He turned to get his pack horse and saw Ike Walters lounging against the door, chewing a straw.

"Leavin', huh?" Walters grunted.

"Damn right!" Bill retorted. "Nothin' to hold a man in this cold-hearted town." Bitterness flooded his voice. "Dad wouldn't even get up to shake hands with me."

Walters started, incredulity blotting his face. Then he blurted out, "God, Bill! Don't you know?"

"Know what?" Something in Ike's voice swung Bill around like a heavy hand.

"Your dad can't get up. He's crippled!"

"He's—what?" Bill whispered, the rope slipping out of his fingers.

"He got a bullet in the back two months ago. Lodged against his spine and he can't move his legs. Hell, I thought you knew! I thought that's why you come home. Then when you come in spoutin' peace . . . sure, I thought you were yellow. I'm sorry, Bill."

Bill stood rooted, while the ground dropped away from him and thoughts raced like wild horses before his mind. It made sense to him now.

That's why Ike and Peggy had taken it for granted he'd be gunning for Rankin. That's why his dad had been so cool. He wanted his son to leave before he, too, met a stray bullet. For the first time in his gruff old life, Ed Taylor was afraid, but not for himself. For Bill.

Suddenly Bill grabbed Walters's shirt. "Who did it?" Bill ground out, shaking Walters like a limp rag. "Was it Rankin?"

"Damn you, let go of me!" Walters

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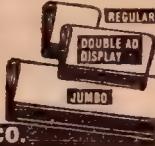
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panted, wrenching free. He was breathing hard and his face was corded. "If anythin' happens to you, Bill, your dad will kill me. He saw who shot him all right, and while he was out of his head, he told me who done it. Then, later, when he found out you were comin' home, he said he didn't know."

"Rankin's fast," Bill said grimly. "Is that why? Dad figgered I couldn't beat Rankin to a gun?"

Walters nodded. "Rankin is fast, Bill. For God's sake, be careful!"

The flood of emotion, of bitter thoughts, receded as rapidly as they had risen, leaving Bill cold as a rock. He should have known something was wrong. He and his dad had always been pals. He should have known old Ed had a deep reason for trying to send him out of the country. And he had almost gone!

His face like granite, Bill turned to his horse, lifted the heavy gunbelt out of the saddle bag and buckled it around his waist with steady fingers. He checked the gun, rolling the cylinder before shoving it lightly into the holster. He pulled his hat down hard and stepped to the door.

"Tke," he said in a hard low voice, "if Rankin is too fast, tell Dad I—didn't know. Let him think he fooled me."

As Bill strode stonily up the street, aware of Peggy's frightened gasp, of townsmen's awed stares, one thought stayed with him: maybe a good doctor, over on the coast, could remove the bullet that was crippling his dad. It would be worth a try.

He pushed open the batwing doors of the Lucky Dollar, stepped boldly into the room, and stopped. He saw Rankin at the near end of the bar, slowly turning to see who had come in. When he saw Bill, he took a quick step away from the bar and froze.

"Howdy, Rankin," Bill called coolly. "I accepted your invitation to come back with a gun. You got one Taylor—in the back. I wanted to know if you could get another one when he was facin' you!"

Like a streak Rankin's hand darted down to his gun. Bill's own gun cleared leather, and the two shots boomed out together.

Bill felt the shock of a bullet, but he didn't know where he was hit until his left leg gave way under him. He fell heavily, catching himself on his left hand as another

GUNMAN'S WELCOME

bullet slammed into the floor beside him.

Rankin had been smashed back against the bar by Bill's first shot. His white shirt was rapidly staining red, but he was still shooting, firing rapidly.

With deliberate calm, Bill leveled his gun for another shot. He felt a second slug crash into him somewhere and he waited for the shock to pass before squeezing the trigger.

For a moment Rankin swayed on his feet, straining desperately to raise his gun arm. Then, slowly, like an empty sack, he crumpled and lay still.

Bill let himself go. Vaguely, he knew when they lifted him and carried him outside, to Ma Whitley's place. He heard his father's gruff voice barking orders. And he heard Peggy Doolin, calling his name, trying to tell him something.

Bill forced his heavy eyes open to read on Peggy's face what she was trying to tell him. It was all he wanted to know.

With a weak smile, he whispered, "Hell, I forgot to tell Dad that I'm sure glad to be home!"

CORPORAL'S PRIVATE MASSACRE

(Continued from page 71)

"One fight too many under his belt," another man who had known Masnick said. "Ten years of this is too much for anybody. Sometimes I wonder why any of us stick to it."

For a moment this remark remained unanswered, and then the man Masnick had called Goodnight said softly, "I don't wonder that at all."

"Why's that?" the D Troop soldier said.

"Because my brother was with your troop at Devil's Canyon and didn't come back," Goodnight said. "He hadn't seen me or the rest of his family for ten years either."

The D Troop soldier did not reply to this. The one possible reason for Masnick's crazy words and sudden fear of a man answering to the name of Goodnight came into his mind as if he had always known it, and he held his tongue. Not for the man who now lay dead at his feet did he remain silent, but rather for the memory of other men already gone, and for the sake of future soldiers who would ride out with D Troop and fail to return.

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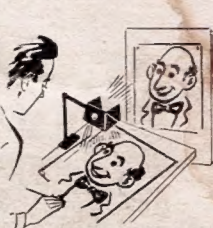
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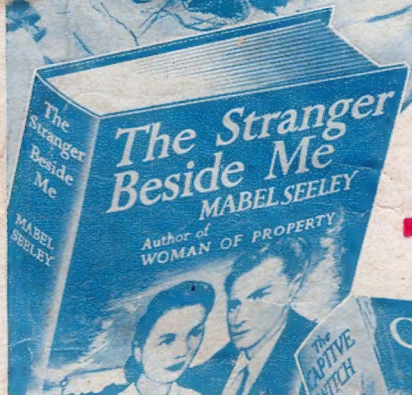
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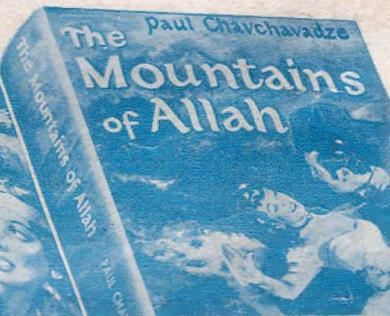
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